An Interview with Carol Bednar: Documenting the Past and Moving on to the Future

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Carol Bednar came to Cal State Fullerton in 1973 as a staff member in the Library and also as a student enrolled in the Library Science Master's program. In the 36 years that followed, Carol held positions in Machine Services, Government Documents, and Reference, and has served as Chair of Technical Services and as Head of Instruction and Information Services. In 1989, Carol was named Government Documents Coordinator and she led this section through the evolution of electronic access technology that developed during the 1980s and 1990s. Carol's contributions--including research expertise, outstanding instructional classes, presentations and publications, awards and grants received--are many and memorable. She reflects on her service and career in an interview with Jie Tian and Catherine Kaye.

Photo by Jennifer Otte

Catherine Kaye & Jie Tian: You received your Master's in Library Science in 1975. What were the issues in libraries at that time?

Carol Bednar: I graduated from Library School at a time of anticipated change. In 1975, most libraries were preparing catalog cards on typewriters; the lucky ones could reproduce the cards with photocopiers to create additional access points including titles and subjects for their card catalogs. However, in the 1960s Henriette Avram at the Library of Congress had developed machine readable cataloging (MARC). By 1975, we knew a revolution was coming that would include our library; we just didn't know how soon it would arrive. The Pollak library installed its first online public access catalog in 1989. It's amazing to think that was only twenty years ago.

Other developments on the national level included the establishment of the U.S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (NCLIS) in 1970 (P.L. 91-345) as an advisory agency on national policies related to libraries. And the Depository Library Council to the Public Printer of the United States was established in 1972 to assist the Government Printing Office in identifying and evaluating alternatives for improving public access to government information through the Federal Depository Library Program. By 1975 it was obvious that local libraries would soon be part of a national structure of library services.

CK & JT: Cal State Fullerton's library is one of 1250 Federal Depository Libraries nationwide that provide free public access to government information. Can you tell us about the role that Depository libraries play in conjunction with academic libraries?

CB: The mission of the Federal Depository Library program is to provide for nationwide community facilities for the perpetual, free and ready public access to the printed and electronic documents, and other government information products of the Federal government.[1] Academic libraries, particularly state institutions, are particularly well suited to assume this responsibility in a democratic society. The Pollak Library's Government Documents Collections include more than a million items, over 70% of which were received through the Depository program. We have been a selective Depository since 1963, and choose material which supports our curriculum and which meets the needs of our local constituents.

CK & JT: The Federal Depository Library Program was in the forefront of transitioning from print products to electronic access. The program began pilot projects in 1988 – the year before you became Government Documents Coordinator – to meet its statutory mandate to provide free access to government information. Did you anticipate the explosion of government information that would be available via the Internet? Has this changed the paradigm for providing service for government information?

CB: Government Documents Librarians were concerned in the late 1980s and early 90s that Congress was moving a bit too quickly in mandating a swift transition to electronic government information. Their expectations outpaced the technology of the time. The Gopher protocol was abstruse at best. In 1993 when PDF files were introduced, they were very slow to load and even slower to print. Few libraries had the equipment needed to access electronic information. Very few patrons owned computers. Government Documents librarians are committed to insuring the public's free access to government information. We worried about the creation of a society of information-disadvantaged citizens.

However, the potential of widespread, immediate, electronic information was dazzling. I remember the first time I saw *The Federal Register* online. I realized that soon, Orange County businesses would not be calling my office asking me if our copy of the *Federal Register* had arrived in the mail. (It often took ten days to arrive from the Government Printing Office.) They would be able to access the information themselves from their own offices the very morning it was published!

Providing service for government information is now more exciting than ever. There is more information available in digital form than ever before. Digital preservation projects are underway throughout the country. Of course, there is much left to be done, and I believe librarians will be needed to help users find material until the day we are all born with the powers of omniscience!

1. *A Strategic Vision for the 21st Century*. December 1, 2004. Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2004, p. 1. http://www.gpo.gov/congressional/pdfs/04strategicplan.pdf.

CK & JT: Librarianship has become, more than ever, a teaching profession. Can you tell us some of the opportunities and challenges that academic librarians face today as they assume a broadened instructional role in their work?

CB: Formal library instruction works best when it is collaboration between the librarian and the discipline faculty member. I was lucky to enjoy some rich collaborations with faculty including Irene Lange, Gordon Bakken, Harvey Grody, Ronald Hughes, Robert Jones, Louise Adler, Jerry Atkin and many others, including some kind souls in the Accounting Department who skillfully guided me through using their arcane databases.

Recently, I have enjoyed the teaching opportunities at the Reference Desk. I am concerned that when students retrieve a list of articles from a metasearch engine, they have no idea what they are looking at. Too often, they assume that all of the results are scholarly journal articles. There are many "teachable moments" at the Reference Desk!

CK & JT: Because of technology, students have tremendously expanded resources available to them today. This places on them the responsibility to critically evaluate information as they do research. In addition to your M.L.S., you have an M.S. in Education with a specialization in Reading. How has this advanced study been of value to you when working with students?

CB: I very much enjoyed the coursework in the M.S. in Education (Reading). It helped me gain an understanding of the skills necessary to assimilate and synthesize new information, which is something our students are trying to do each day. One of the highlights of my career was teaching a course for the Reading Department for five semesters in developing reading speed and efficiency. The class was comprised of good students who wanted to become better students. It was very exciting to watch their skills improve!

CK & JT: Students' academic and personal lives are very integrated today and the library can be the center of their day. Have you enjoyed the transition from the traditional library environment (of whispering and speaking softly) to today's very dynamic Information Commons environment?

CB: I've never been much of a "shusher." The librarian at the Chickasha (Oklahoma) Public Library caused me to rebel against that practice! Seriously, though, I love that the Pollak Library is a vibrant place where students want to be. I am such a fan of the Cal State Fullerton students. They have so many competing demands on their time and are very appreciative of the assistance that they receive from the Library and its staff. It's been very nice to have been thanked by someone every day I've worked at the Reference Desk!

CK & JT: You have been head of the Government Documents Section and have assumed management and leadership responsibilities in both Government Documents and in the Library. Would you share with us your philosophy of leadership?

CB: First, surround yourself with smart, self-motivated people, who are passionately committed to the goals of the organization. Then give them the tools, resources, support, and freedom they need to do their jobs. After that, stay out of their way except to thank them, and cheer them on. Also, contribute any good ideas you might have along the way. I have been privileged to work with won-

derful individuals in the Government Documents Section for the last thirty-six years.

The late Don Schweitzer (former CSUF VP of Academic Affairs and Dean of H&SS) was a leader I greatly admired. He described himself as the "tick bird" atop of the CSUF rhinoceros, removing irritations from the rhino, warning of danger, and perhaps seeing what was coming down the road – a nice metaphor for leadership. Don was also a practicing magician, and I think this gave him an optimistic sense of what is possible.

CK & JT: In 2000, you received the award for Outstanding Service to the University in recognition of your service to the Community, to the University, and to Students. Throughout your career, you have been very active in many facets of librarianship, from instruction to serving on CSU-wide task forces. What accomplishments have given you the most satisfaction?

CB: My most satisfying experience was serving on the CSU EAR (Electronic Access to Resources) Committee 1996-1999, and helping to write the *Criteria for CSU Electronic Information Resources Core Collection* and the *Principles for CSU Acquisition of Electronic Information Resources*. I worked with seven librarians from other CSU campuses, including Paul Adalian, from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo and Dave Perkins from Cal State Northridge, plus Maithreyi Monoharan, Associate VP for Information Technology from CSU, Stanislaus, and the indomitable Evan Reader, Director of Software & Electronic Information Resources at the Chancellor's Office. This was the beginning of consortial buying of electronic resources for the CSU libraries and was quite controversial at the time! It would be hard to overestimate the benefits our CSU students and faculty have received from the wealth of electronic information resources we have been able to provide them.

CK & JT: If we gave you a camera and asked you to take a picture of something in the Library to show a new freshman, what would it be?

CB: Without question, the Reference Desk! How many times has a student said, "I wasted hours trying to find this on my own. You showed me how in five minutes." Most people need to be shown at least once how to turn their research question into a successful search, how to choose which sources to use, and how to evaluate the results. Disintermediation is a dirty word to me. I find it ironic that as a society we are trying to refine services to the point where human contact is not needed, but as individuals, we yearn to be constantly "plugged into" each other via cell phones, Twitter, Facebook, etc.

CK & JT: You are participating in the Faculty Early Retirement Program (FERP), a program that provides a transition from full-time teaching to full-time retirement. Have you enjoyed having a bridge between your work life and retirement? And we congratulate you on having been awarded the title *Librarian, Emeritus* by President Gordon so soon!

CB: I think of my career as a bell curve which has luckily meshed with the other parts of my life. When my sons were small, I worked part-time. Then, I had several very intense working years including seven years as Department Chair. I have enjoyed FERPing during this last five year glide path to retirement.

CK & JT: You spend your days surrounded by books, encyclopedias, journals, and government documents on every branch of knowledge imaginable. Can you tell us, when you go home at the end of your workday, what do you enjoy reading?

CB: I'm lucky enough to have been a member of the same book group since I came to CSUF in 1973! It began as the "Faculty Wives Club Book Group" (what an anachronism!), morphed into the "Faculty Women's Club Book Group," and now is just "Book Group." We read a variety of fiction and non-fiction and an occasional classic. Recent favorites are *My Life in France* by Julia Child and Alex Prud'Homme, and David McCullough's *John Adams.* I also subscribe to the daily print edition of the *New York Times* and enjoy the wonderful writing it contains. When I'm under stress, I read mysteries. It's satisfying to have all the loose ends tied up at the end!

CK & JT: As you say farewell to 36 years of distinguished service to the Library and our campus, can you share with us some of your plans for the future?

CB: First, I plan to spend more time with my family and friends. Also, I have lived on a one-block street for twenty-two years and many of my neighbors are original owners. They are fun-loving, salt-of-the earth people, and I look forward to sharing their 4:30 pm cocktail time! Also, I hope to put my Reading Degree to use as a volunteer in the local elementary school a block from my house. My husband Dick and I have recently discovered snorkeling, so I look forward to more adventures with sea life. I am a sports fan and have tickets to some Angels games this summer. Who knows? Maybe I'll even get back to Norman, OK, for an OU football game someday. There's a lot of fun to be had out there!

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On behalf of all in the Library, we thank Carol for her countless contributions to the students, the campus, and to her co-workers over the last 36 years and we wish her every happiness in her future.

Carol Bednar was interviewed by Catherine Kaye and Jie Tian.
Design and photo by Jennifer Otte.

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