

ARL Member Representatives Retiring in Fall 2018

ARL's Kaylyn Groves interviewed two member representatives who are retiring in fall 2018.

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Sarah Thomas

Sarah E. Thomas, vice president for the Harvard Library and the Roy E. Larsen Librarian of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, plans to retire at the end of 2018 after five years leading the Harvard libraries. From 2007 to 2013 she served as Bodley's Librarian, overseeing Oxford's university libraries, including the historic Bodleian Library. She was university librarian at Cornell University from 1996 until 2007. She began her career at Harvard University's Widener Library and has since worked at Johns Hopkins University, the Research Libraries Group, the National Agricultural Library, and the Library of Congress.



Sarah earned a BA from Smith College, an MS in library science from Simmons College, and a PhD in German literature from Johns Hopkins University.

In 2003–2004 Sarah served as the president of the Association of Research Libraries. She received the Melvil Dewey Award from the American Library Association in 2007. In 2010 she was awarded the Smith College Medal and she was elected a member of Oxford's University Council. She was elected a member of the American Philosophical Society in 2013 and made a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, also in 2013.

ARL's Kaylyn Groves spoke with Sarah in August 2018. The edited interview follows.

Why and how did you get started in librarianship?

When I was in college, I worked in the library. One of my jobs was pasting bookplates into the library's Margaret Sanger collection. Sitting there in that atmosphere, surrounded by books and seeing the behind-the-scenes activity in the library, that got me started. Although, I also remember during my senior year, a friend told me she was planning to go to Simmons College to become a librarian and I thought, "Oh my god, never! Life has got to be more exciting than that." It was the time of the Vietnam War, the Kent State massacre—rebellion and adventure were calling. But the reality was that when I graduated I didn't know what I was going to do. I had a summer sublet in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and needed to pay the rent. I applied for a job at Harvard's Widener Library and they hired me. I did that job, which was alphabetizing and filing catalog cards, for almost a year. Then I went to Germany for a few months to study. When I came back, Widener Library hired me again. My salary as a library assistant was \$5,400 a year. I was even able to buy expensive Italian shoes on that salary! The library told me about a program where they would pay half my tuition for library school and give me one day off each week. I went to Simmons and got my library degree in three semesters part time. Harvard hired me as a professional cataloger and my salary doubled to \$10,800. Shows you the value of the library degree back then.

What is a highlight of your career?

In each job I've had, I've thought, "This is the best job and I could be here the rest of my life." At the Library of Congress (LC), I was appointed director for cataloging by Winston Tabb. I thought, "Wow, this is the pinnacle." It was an incredible opportunity to represent LC.

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I went to Cornell to be university librarian and I adored Cornell. The staff were superb. I felt they offered the best quality service one could want. A highlight there was our acquisition of a spectacular Native American collection. There was so much joy in bringing this collection to a university where people would be able to use the materials in research and education. Native Americans came and performed a fantastic welcoming ceremony.

Then I was selected to be Bodley's Librarian at Oxford. Who knew an American could do that? I was the first woman and the first non-Briton to head the Bodleian. A highlight there was a project we did with Queen Elizabeth II. For her Diamond Jubilee, as a present to the Commonwealth, we digitized Queen Victoria's journals and made them publicly available in the Commonwealth. As a thank you, we had a private audience for almost 40 minutes with Her Majesty.

And today I'm sitting in a corner office of Widener Library. Coming back from being the lowest of employees to having the top role. My career has spanned a whole range of experiences I never anticipated.

Were there goals that you had set for yourself as an ARL director but have not yet reached?

Thousands of them, but I will choose one. When I first became an ARL director in 1996 at Cornell, Shirley Baker, then head of libraries at Washington University in St. Louis, told me the same men would always stand up and ask questions at the ARL meetings. Shirley set herself a goal that she would be someone who stood up and asked questions at those meetings. Initially she was anxious about it, but she conquered that feeling of doubting herself, and that's what I remember about Shirley at ARL meetings. That's a goal that I had but didn't actually achieve. I'm more comfortable in small groups. Of course I became ARL president, and I'm not afraid of talking to large groups when it's my assigned role, because then I have that authority. I'm just not comfortable standing at that microphone to ask impromptu questions in a large meeting.

What advice do you have for individuals who aspire to leadership positions/roles in libraries?

What's worked for me: I've loved every job I've had, I'm passionate about my work. I used to think, "If only these people who hired me realized I would've done the work for nothing" (although I couldn't afford that). I always invested 100% because it meant so much to me. If you're not feeling like that, it's not the right job.

I remember sitting at an ACRL meeting in Charlottesville, Virginia, and a woman came up to me and asked, "How do I get to be Bodley's Librarian someday?" That's like asking, "How do I get to be LeBron James?" So few people get to do it, you're bound to be disappointed if something like that is your goal. Just set out to do well at what you are currently doing, keep your eyes open, and look beyond your role—the more you understand the big picture, the better you'll be able to perform. Setting your sights on a particular job is a recipe for failure.

For a long time, I thought I was a failure because I wasn't a very good critic. I would always try to make ideas succeed. I never said, "That won't work." I wasn't pointing out flaws, I was trying to build on ideas. Actually, people like that and I think it makes you more likely to succeed. Don't be a "yes" person, but be a problem solver, present positive alternatives.

What still inspires you about librarianship?

I've loved my colleagues, collaboration really motivates me, the idea that we're making something bigger than ourselves. It's very rewarding to work with smart, committed people. The integrity of my colleagues is something that inspires me. There are very strong values in the profession, which are motivating. Back when I was in finishing college, there were three of us who lived in a small house at Smith: myself; Betsy Humphreys, who went on to become deputy director at the National Library of Medicine; and Paula Kaufman, who eventually led the libraries at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. We were all at Smith together in the late '60s. I remember in an interview with our college alumnae magazine, when we were asked why we chose librarianship as a profession, Betsy said, having graduated in the era of the "military-industrial complex," she wanted to go into a job where she would never have to apologize for what she was doing. She wanted to always be wearing the white hat. I think that's a terrific way to think about librarianship.

What key issues do you think research libraries will face in the next five years?

Working at scale—collaborating on a national and a global level—is going to be the biggest challenge. Putting those pieces together as we move from being individual actors to being permanently connected to other people and organizations in formal relationships will be a major shift from the alliances we form today, which can change when one director succeeds another. The new relationships will be structured not at the individual level, but rather at the institutional level.

What do you look forward to in retirement?

I very much look forward to unscheduled time, time to think, time to look out at the trees blowing in the wind.

I do hope to spend a couple of months each year in Oxford. I have 30 years of family correspondence from an era before email that I want to review and see if there's a book that could come out of that. My mother was an inveterate letter writer. When I was away in Europe, she wrote at least once a week. She kept all my correspondence and I kept hers so I have both sides of our conversations. She might write that they played golf and had jellied salad with pineapple rings but then there'll be something about watching the Anita Hill hearings on television with commentary on the times. She might write about my brother who served in Vietnam and meanwhile I was off protesting the war. I hope to be able to bring out themes about women and other social and political issues of our time—raise the family history above the personal to themes of the late 20th century.

I also enjoy open-water swimming. I started in Ithaca, swimming across Cayuga Lake to fundraise for hospice care. Here I swim in Walden Pond. While swimming I outline the chapters of my book. I'm looking forward to having more time to exercise and to think.

ARL has been an extraordinary resource and support network for me. It's where one learns to be a librarian at a research university. I want to extend my thanks for all that ARL has given me, especially the many wonderful colleagues who have been friends and mentors over decades.

Scott Seaman

Scott H. Seaman has served as dean of Ohio University Libraries since 2008 and plans to retire at the end of 2018. Previously, Scott was associate dean of libraries at University of Colorado Boulder from 1997 to 2008. He began his library career as a bibliographic maintenance specialist at OCLC in 1984 and worked for The Ohio State University Libraries from 1988 to 1991.

Scott earned a BA in art and business from Wright State University, a master's in art history from The Ohio State University, and a master's in library science from Kent State University.



Scott has served on numerous national committees and several governance boards, including those of the Colorado Library Association and the Central Colorado Library System. He is a former chair of the OhioLINK Library Advisory Council and serves on the Ohio Board of Regent's Advisory Board for OhioLINK.

ARL's Kaylyn Groves talked with Scott in August 2018. The edited interview follows.

Why and how did you get started in librarianship?

I was in graduate school, a history of art program, and spending lots of time in several libraries, doing research. I discovered that I was really intrigued by the idea of libraries. Before then I had not given much thought to these institutions that actively identified, collected, made available, and preserved all of this intellectual content. I thought, "Wow, that's really very interesting. How do you do that for today and for successive generations?" So I chose to go to library school at Kent State. It was a very intellectually-based approach, rather than pragmatic—I had never worked in a library, I had an outsider's perspective looking in.

My first job during library school was at OCLC in the 1980s doing retrospective conversion, putting library catalog cards online. Most people really disliked that work but I found it endlessly fascinating. Other people were approaching it as a task-based activity. I was looking at it as the early days of building online catalogs. I really enjoyed the idea that there were collections scattered across the country that were now being systematically linked together. That was quite revolutionary at the time. I was excited about playing a tiny part in that.

What is a highlight of your career?

On one hand, there are a lot of highlights, so many I don't know where to start. Also I wouldn't describe them as "my highlights." Everything has been a team effort that took so many different people, it's difficult to lay claim to one thing that is "mine." We've done great building projects and online projects. One of the things I'm extremely proud of that was very much a collaborative effort is transforming the culture at Ohio University from a book-centered library to a student-centered library. This took more than a decade and involved a lot of people: librarians, library staff, university administrators, and donors. (Donors funded projects that shifted attitudes: a learning

commons and staff development.) Cultural changes are somewhat vague and hard to assess but will have profound, long-lasting impact.

Were there goals that you had set for yourself as an ARL director but have not yet reached?

I would have thought that by now research libraries would have had more integrated access to our electronic content than we do. Access that is critical to our campus and all campuses is still fragmented and too difficult. I would have hoped that we would have found a better way to make that content accessible. We're still struggling with that.

What advice do you have for individuals who aspire to leadership positions/roles in libraries?

You need to be extremely passionate about doing this work because it is something you will do 70–80 hours a week for many years. I think you also need to be exceptionally flexible because the vision you come in with will need to be modified along the way. So often we come in with three or four big tasks we want to accomplish, but the environment changes so quickly we either have to modify our goals significantly or give up on them altogether to facilitate our students' and faculty's success.

What still inspires you about librarianship?

I'll start with the local: our students and faculty use this library more today than ever before in history. Total entrances into the building and the number of downloads per student go up every year by 8–10%. So students and faculty still find a lot of value in the library. I think they find that value in a different way than they would have 25 years ago, but I find it inspirational that we are still able, as large cultural heritage organizations, to connect with our communities in very dynamic ways that they value. Twenty-five years ago there was a lot of conversation about whether libraries would survive. Here we are in 2018 and the problems we have are how to transform a building to meet the ever-increasing pressures of the community, and how to make the library website accessible and help people find the content they are craving.

What key issues do you think research libraries will face in the next five years?

We still need to transform our physical spaces so they meet the needs of the 21st-century student. Part of that involves managing our legacy print collections in a way that preserves the integrity of the scholarly record but significantly reduces the footprint of collections on our campuses. We've begun to do that but we have not figured out the complete answer yet.

We also still need more accessible websites that direct users to relevant content much more seamlessly. Related to that, the open content movement is starting to gather momentum and, having spent decades working with open access in small ways, I'm encouraged that open textbooks, open research, and open data are now poised to take off. That will have tremendous impact on how we collect and organize information, as will the "big data" that our researchers are creating. There are other issues, of course, but those are the critical ones.

What do you look forward to in retirement?

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Not having a calendar—I've been so calendar-driven over the last 20 years, that will be freedom in and of itself. I enjoy skiing and cycling so it will be nice to do more of that. And my family and I will have time to reconnect in ways we simply have not been able to in recent years.