Singapore Management University

Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University

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Oral History Interview with Ruth Pagell: Conceptualising SMU

Ruth PAGELL

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Singapore Management University

Li Ka Shing Library

Conceptualising SMU: The People and Ideas behind the SMU Story

Interviewee: Ruth A Pagell

Interviewer: Patricia Meyer

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Patricia Meyer:	How did you first hear about SMU?
Ruth:	I was at Emory University before I came here and it had quite a connection with Emory. When I first heard about it, the President [of SMU] was Ron Frank who had actually hired me to be the head of the business library at Emory. And then I knew Woody had taken over as President and I had worked with Woody in some capacities at Emory and also he had been my boss's boss, he had been Acting Provost, so the University Librarian, the Vice Provost reported to him and of course the dean of the business school also reported to him.
Patricia Meyer:	You were saying that the Library was just shifting into its new space at the city campus. Can you just tell us a little bit about that space and also how the building got its name?
Ruth:	The building was designed without any input from any academic librarians from the US and libraries had really been changing at the end of the 20th century, the beginning of this century and they were moving from passive to active. The building plans that I saw in March of 2005 which was [during] my intermediate visit here, shows rows and rows of tables and people packed together like little sardines on each one of the floors. I have to admit that I was pretty upset. The building was beautiful and I was thrilled by the outside of the building and what could have happened in the internal space but I was not thrilled by the furniture that they had purchased and how they had set the library up. Quite honestly when I talked to the consultant about learning spaces and changing buildings to meet the patterns that students were learning and the thing about SMU was they were teaching American style. They were teaching seminar style and students were being told to interact with each other and talk to each other and then you created a library that was kind of a throwback to the 1950s where everyone sat there and just did their own work. It was then a challenge to take this beautiful building externally and gradually make changes to it to reflect what was actually going on in the university
Patricia Meyer:	At that point in 2005, just to use as a point of reference, can you tell us about what kind of services the library offered, what its collections were like and how was it being used on a daily basis?
Ruth:	At that point, when we moved in here, the library had an even smaller collection than I had anticipated. They had about 20,000 different titles and up to that point, books were being purchased on a one-off basis. Normally when you start a new library you buy an opening day collection. SMU had not done that. Individual faculty were ordering the books that they wanted and there was no collection development policy. There were no librarians to actually do a collection development policy. There was an assortment of different books based on the classes that were being taught.

The students assumed that libraries were study halls. I mean that was what they were used to. From their public library experience, the people at the desk checked out books and you were supposed to be very quiet in the library. In the beginning, I really upset the staff because I said, "not quiet". If they are learning interactively then they have to speak |

to each other and it's not our job to be police people and this is still something we are working on -- getting the students to be responsible enough to ask other people to be quiet.

Patricia Meyer: As you're making that transition from an NLB-managed library to an independent library within SMU, what were some of the functions that SMU started taking on from the beginning?

Ruth: Ordering books was one of the important things. There were many, many complaints from faculty that it took too long for books to come in. We took over the book ordering process. We hired three librarians right away with subject background and with some technical background to be able to start doing these things on our own. We set up an information services desk so that people could ask research questions. We began offering training to students on a very limited basis. We did outreach to faculty. The School of Economics and Social Sciences were the only ones given money to start up a collection and they didn't know how to do it. We were able to take over their money. We hired a retired librarian from NUS and she worked with them to spend their funds and to set up materials of their own. We gradually tried to introduce services that were very standard in all of the libraries I had been familiar with and then over the course of the five years, certainly, we've been able to put all of these in place. Our main goal, however, within the [first] three years was that we wanted to be totally free of NLB by the end of the contract extension which meant that we needed something that we call an integrated library management system which again was standard. They had their own but it was not for academic libraries. It was a public library system and it didn't do any of the things we wanted it to do. None of the academic libraries in the US or Europe or anywhere were using it. So the main thing we had to accomplish by December of 2008 was to have this integrated library system in place and be able to do everything ourselves.

Patricia Meyer: I want to ask you about some of those points in more detail but before we get into that, I just want to back up and ask one question that has to do with you. Before you arrived, the library group was headed up by a Chief Librarian and you became the first University Librarian. Can you just tell us what is the role of an University Librarian at SMU?

Ruth: I had to create a role here. It was not the role I had anticipated because SMU in Singapore is not ready for the role librarians are now playing in the US and I gather from talking to people in places like Hong Kong, Australia and Europe as well. Libraries have had an up and down relationship with universities over time. When I first actually entered the profession, they were in a downturn and they really were repositories. People came in to study and everything was reactive. With the beginning of electronic resources and I've been using electronic resources since the beginning of my career at the end of the 1970s, things started changing because we had new ways of disseminating information. The library has once again taken on a really important role, especially in academic research institutions where university librarians are often deans, they are often vice provosts, they usually sit on senior management councils and make decisions that affect the strategic, research, scholarly directions of the university. I naively thought I was being hired for a

senior management position and it didn't take me long to figure out when I got here that that was not what they understood the position to be at all.

One of the things I was expected to do and have been vigorously doing and actually Paolina [Paolina Martin] in her role as Institutional Repository Director helps a lot this way as well, is to integrate the library in the scholarly direction of the university because this is the role that it is playing within the US - very active in scholarly space. A lot of it came about with digitization because they started digitizing special collections. We don't have any special collections so we had to look at it in a different way, partnerships with faculty; much more respect for librarians; hiring librarians with two Master degrees, not just one Masters degree. We were hiring people with subject specialties, Masters in their subject area so that they could speak to faculty in the language of the faculty. The role is quite different then what people see. One thing I don't have to do, thank goodness, is that university librarians in the US are now asked to be doing fundraising and the unexpected consequence is that when people are leaving some of these high profile jobs, they are having problems filling them because librarians really don't want to do fundraising. That's not within our natural scope. However, marketing is extremely important and one of the things that we've been doing here is being extremely proactive, going out knocking on doors just like a salesperson which has impact on the kind of people we can then hire as well.

Patricia Meyer: I want to follow up on asking you for some examples of how you support faculty for example in their research. How does the library do that now?

Ruth: We support faculty in a variety of different ways - of just following up on knocking on doors - each one of the six schools has a subject specialist librarian who is the librarian for that school. We get a list of new faculty who are coming on board and they all get a letter from the Library, an email letter with the subject specialist librarian introducing herself or himself and asking the faculty to come over and have an orientation at the library, asking them to suggest ten items that they can't live without on their opening day so that we can try to purchase a few things for them. Then the subject specialist librarians have worked up very close relationships with the faculty in terms of supporting their teaching and research and I'll get back to that later. But an important piece of it is something that we call Course Support Services, which is not a typical model.

Ruth: So now we also support research for faculty, master's students and hopefully undergraduates because this is something that I can remember doing in the US when I was a student, was something called inter-library loan. You cannot expect any university to have everything that everyone needs. Inter-library loan is interesting because if you look at the statistics of the major research libraries in the US that have collections of two, three, four, five million books, they are very heavy lenders and borrowers because when you are encouraging research, you are going outside your boundaries. With our small collection, I had envisioned, quite honestly, much more active inter-library loan than [what] we are doing. When I came here, faculty were asked to pay for articles if they wanted them. Not to anyone's surprise, they were not asking. So the first thing I did was say, "If we don't own the book, it is not their fault." We have made the decision not to own the book or not to own the journal; it's our responsibility as part of our collection development to source for it. It is not that easy in Singapore, there is no consortium in place. I have come from places both in Philadelphia and in Atlanta where there were inter-library loan systems in place, where there were many mechanisms to get books from different libraries, the university librarians within Atlanta, if you came to your library, you can get a card and go to any other library and check out a book. Philadelphia had a little truck that went around from library to library. Here the main source of materials was NUS and we had a corporate card and that was the only way we could order books. One of the other things we had to do - it was very difficult - was to try to breakdown these barriers. Finally, a couple years ago, a system was put in place that NLB is actually managing because it's administrative, where it's easier to get books from other libraries. There's a fee involved which we are happy to pay.

Patricia Meyer: I want to ask you about another area of the library of your time here and that is, not long after you arrived, you started putting in place a digital library and can you explain what that is and why it matters to an everyday user?

Ruth: The very first meeting we had of the Digital Library Steering Committee - we called in somebody from NLB as well - was to try to come up with a definition for what a digital library meant for SMU. In many places digital library started with digitization of internal materials. As I mentioned before, we didn't have any internal materials to digitize. At Goizueta, I started there in 1994 and by 1995, '96, we had started using the internet to deliver our databases to our users. We were very early adaptors of getting information to where people are. It was allowing users to have access wherever they were in "digital" format. After several iterations of the digital library, to us, the entire library is now a digital library. Because even what we do not have in electronic format, you have access to in electronic format. The digital library is the library. It's the physical space and the virtual space. It matters to users because this is an internet generation and librarians used to -- I hate to use this term – whine that people were not coming into the library, a problem we don't have because they have no place else to go since there is no student union. But they don't really have to physically come to the library. They just need to be able to get the resources that that they need and not have to search through one million hits on Google to get what they need in a format that's understandable to them and an interface that they are familiar with wherever they are. That's what we're trying to do when we purchased what we called our discovery tools, which is one piece of the digital library.

From the backend side, when I was talking about all the different things that we originally did like ordering books and processing books and checking in periodicals, now everything is done electronically. We order books directly from a major book vendor in the US, electronically and they get our order and they do everything that NLB used to do and the books are shipped to us, shelf-ready from the US, just as they were shipped to us from Changi where NLB has its place. Everything is now managed through this backend electronic system that people don't see which is unfortunate.

From the users' perspective, libraries were one of the first adaptors of technology. In my very first public library job which was in the early 1970s, we started using electronic cataloguing, shared cataloguing from OCLC which is a company that still exists and old terminals that were these standalone CRT terminals. We have been using digital ways of sharing information well before many, many other industries even thought about it. So it's something we really always been doing. Because we were doing it for so long, we just took our existing practices and put them into electronic format. And nobody ever was happy with the card catalogue. [Access to] books used to be in these drawers of card catalogues and you could only find them by author's last name if you happened to know it or title or subject if you happened to think in terms of what a subject heading would be, which is not how individuals speak at all. Even when we put up our first electronic catalogues, they really weren't speaking to our users. Now if you look at our discovery platform, PYXIS, it's a Google box and you can type in anything and it is like searching Google but you hopefully don't get a million hits. You can't, we don't have that many materials. Ideally as it becomes more sophisticated and they really have been improving this every few months - we are getting a new iteration in another month or two - it starts searching across things. So it searches the books that we own and it searches for everything that is in our repository and it searches for the Research Guides that the Research Librarians have created and it will be searching for articles but right now you just click and you can search for articles or you can just click a tab and search for the journals that we have access to. Ideally, we are looking for this one box where you don't need to know because when you're doing research, you don't care, right? You don't care if it is a book or a journal or a research guide or an authoritative website if it has the information you want. So that's what we're aiming for within the digital context.

The "light bulb" went on in terms of the whole library being the digital library in a conversation we had with Woody, and the then Vice President [should be Deputy President] Chin Tiong who was not that much into digital things and he said, "Well, you know, everything is really the digital library at this point." And that's when we saw, "Yes, everything that we are doing at this point is a Digital Library." So we don't have things to digitize but now we doing our oral history project; [it's] access to everything wherever you are.

Patricia Meyer: Can you tell us how the name PYXIS came about?

Ruth: I'm proud of the way that we created the integrated library management system. We did everything by the book, which is not the way I normally operate. We had a steering committee [Digital Library steering committee], we had a planning committee [Digital Library planning committee], we had an implementation committee, we had a strategic

plan for the Digital Library and we had as much user involvement as we possibly could because we didn't want to spring this on them and not to have them have input. So one of the last things we did was have a naming competition and we had a contest to ask students and faculty.

Patricia Meyer: So it was opened up to the community?

Ruth: We just opened it up to the community. We selected a panel of judges and this was the name that was selected. And at first it was a little puzzling because, "What's PYXIS?" But it turns out that PYXIS is a star constellation that helps sailors navigate. And because our mosaic downstairs, which is a gift from the Li Ka Shing Foundation as part of the opening of the library, is a 'sea of knowledge', it nicely seems to morph together that PYXIS then helped our users navigate the sea of knowledge.

Patricia Meyer: You touched on this earlier when you described the layout of the library as it was when you first arrived. Can you tell us what changes you made to how this space was utilised?

Ruth: So the first thing that we did was to get some money from the President's fund, hire a design firm and come up with a Collaborative Study Area to visibly show what it was we were trying to do. I mean we have nice project rooms but to say this is a collaborative library, this is the way you work in projects and you talk to each other. That was one thing we changed. Course Reserve was in a large room and the idea of course reserve is to check out books but the room was so large that people were sitting there using them. We moved Course Reserve. As much as we wanted students to be talking, there were still students who wanted a quiet area; we created a quiet area. Fifth floor Reading Room we use as an events space. We share it with other members of the SMU community. We have just set up a Postgraduate Suite because the university really had not planned [space] for graduate students and all of the post-graduates in coursework have no place to go. This was the latest thing we did which was to create a space for them.

Patricia Meyer: What were the initial challenges that you faced in building the library staff?

Ruth: We needed people who were good at doing presentations and you can't get hired here without doing a presentation. We needed people who were willing to try new things, who weren't afraid of taking risks and making mistakes. And I know for myself, I need people who are self-motivated, that I am not very good at working with people who need to be told how to do a job. We needed people who were outcome- based, who could see this is where we wanted to be and then come back with suggestions on how to get there and implement it themselves. That was always difficult enough in the US and when people get annoyed with me when I say we have had to look outside Singapore because there is a very small pool of librarians in Singapore, I tell them that we could never have hired the small staff we had in Goizueta if we only hired people from Atlanta, that it is just too small a pool and we were drawing on the whole United States. The pool was finding people in

Singapore who would fit. I was told to head a Western library so I was not going to go ram down their throats what we had at Wharton or what this guy wanted us to have who came from Stanford but it had to be Western enough that was different from other libraries in Singapore and that it fit the teaching style of SMU, and that was hard.

Patricia Meyer:	You mentioned training of the library staff. Can you also tell us about training of the library users?

Ruth:	We had to teach them this is a learning commons and this is the other new trend in libraries. They went from study space to information commons where there were all these computers, and thank goodness we do not have that, to a learning commons where there is active learning going on. The way to do that was to get them to come to the library for something other than just studying.

The other thing is this is the culture where you don't ask questions because if you go up to an information desk and ask questions, you are admitting you don't know the answer to something. Librarians are not even respected, so you are not going to go up to somebody who you think knows less than you do and admit that you do not know something. How are we going to get students to start using the library for other purposes and learn to meet the librarians and respect the librarians? The way we have done it is through training. We introduced training through matriculation and after a couple of years, we said it was mandatory and the Registrar now says it's mandatory.

Patricia Meyer:	Can you tell us a little bit more about how the model for SMU's library compares with that for the other university libraries in Singapore, NUS, NTU or the new Singapore University of Technology and Design?

Ruth:	we are not going to build a large collection. It made absolutely no sense to build a large collection. From day one, we had to look at different models of providing services to our users. We couldn't send them to the stacks. We had to look at things in a different way. Libraries all over are now moving more and more toward electronic access. In the US, these large legacy libraries have taken the majority of their collections and put them into offsite storage. People are not using the older books. They certainly are not using the older run of journals The model has to be different. One of the things I learned at Goizueta when I got there and had to set up a library was it had a lousy collection but we were just on the verge of being able to introduce things electronically. My answer has always been service. Good service can trump a good collection. Faculty do not have to know what they do not have as long as you can get things to them. I think where we differ most is our really heavy commitment to service.

Patricia Meyer:	And this is a very broad question but from your perspective, how has the role of librarians changed over the course of your career?

Ruth:	Oh, it has changed dramatically over the course of my career. I think I talked a little bit about it before. I've been in the profession a very long time and when I joined the profession, the first thing people would say to me was, and I guess it was a compliment, "You don't look like a librarian," and I don't think like a librarian. I used to be odd-person out. I don't think I am quite as much odd-person out as I used to be, that I always wanted to try new things, do new things. I was fortunate to have a boss who was willing to try anything and then I was the one who had to implement it and go out and talk about it. When I joined the profession, libraries were repositories. I could understand why people weren't that interested in it and they certainly were not service-driven. You walked up to a desk and somebody would point, "Go there," or "Do it yourself." I knew it just didn't work and that's not what people wanted.
Patricia Meyer:	How would you see the strengths of SMU's library today?
Ruth:	Service, personalisation, training, trust.
Patricia Meyer:	And how would you like to see the library develop in the future and what do you think the challenges might be?
Ruth:	My role, I usually do change management but in this case it was building. We spent a lot of time building and putting infrastructure in place which I think right now is a very strong infrastructure. We really have gotten the best of what's out there. We have a very good integrated library management system - world standard - we have got a world standard platform for our repository. We have most of the databases that we need. We don't need change management at this time but we need more building on the infrastructure.
	It was very easy for me when I came in. Anything I did was going to look better than what we had. It was easy relative to the faculty, not so much the students because the students don't know what to expect. But the faculty are the people who are here on an ongoing basis and the deans. It was easy to put things in place that either were what they were used to or in the case of some of them, it was things they hadn't even seen where they came from. Now we've got to take the infrastructure and go a step further, see what else is out there, what else can we be doing that is new. This is where the whole data issue comes in, that we really need to be in the data space. Archives, not very interesting but extremely important. A lot of libraries are involved in archives [and we] have to get into the archives business. [We] need somebody who is going to be looking around seeing what other services [are needed]. Consortia - there is no cooperation here. We have got to be pushing more and more for cooperation. There are two new universities coming along. I have been talking to them about library services. Unfortunately I'm leaving and can't continue. I have some vendors interested. This is another area for growth and it doesn't only have to be within Singapore. How can we have relationships with libraries outside of Singapore, consortial relationships? It should be just as exciting for the person who follows me because there is so much to do. It will be a little more difficult because whatever is done won't be quite as obvious quite so quickly.

End of Interview

Acronyms List

Acronym	Definition
C2TE	Centre for Communication and Teaching Excellence
CAC	Centre for Academic Computing
CRT	Cathode Ray Terminal
CTE	Centre for Teaching Excellence
HKUST	Hong Kong University of Science and Technology
HR	Human Resource
IITS	Integrated Information Technology Services
InK	Institutional Knowledge at SMU
JB	Johor Bahru
MBA	Master of Business Administration
NCAA	National Collegiate Athletic Association
NLB	National Library Board
NTU	Nanyang Technological University
NUS	National University of Singapore
NYU	New York University
OCLC	Online Computer Library Centre
PRDLA	Pacific Rim Digital Library Alliance
PYXIS	SMU's digital library
RFID	Radio-Frequency Identification
SMS	Short Messaging Service
SMU	Singapore Management University
TIAA-CREF	Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association-College Retirement Equities Fund
US	United States