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Chimera in the Library: A Journey Through the Cultures of IT, Libraries, & Library IT

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Chimera in the Library: A Journey Through the Cultures of IT, Libraries, & Library IT – by Stephanie Walker, Dean of Libraries & Information Resources, University of North Dakota

In library IT, you may undertake formal studies toward a career path. Alternatively, you may find yourself in IT roles accidentally: you weren't afraid to tackle technology, so people turned to you. The latter seemed prevalent in library computing's early days. A colleague of mine tells of being a system's only male librarian twenty-five years ago, and being thrust into the role of Head of Library Systems. He believes gender was a factor. I wish I disbelieved him, but I've often been there from the other side, as the sole woman and manager in a tech environment. Some clients demanded to see the boss, saying "You can't be! You're a girl!" My calculus professor said "girls don't belong in STEM." Computer science remains male-dominated. "A lot of computing pioneers – the people who programmed the first digital computers – were women," writes Steve Henn, in *When Women Stopped Coding*. "But in 1984 … the percentage of women in computer science flattened, then plunged, even as the share of women in other technical and professional fields kept rising."[1] In 2013, women were "26 percent of computing professionals and just 12 percent of working engineers."[2] Library science is about 80% female/20% male[3] (with men in about 40% of leadership positions[4]). Then there's me. I've often done things in non-traditional ways, and my career is no exception. A chimera is (mythologically) "a monstrous creature with parts from multiple animals" or (genetically) "a single animal organism with genetically distinct cells from two distinct zygotes."[5] I've frequently felt like this 2-in-1 creature, in IT and libraries. I vary my communications from tech-heavy discussions with sysadmins to user-friendly language with those less comfortable with tech. I'm a self-described "tekkie." I'm also an "artsie" – the "other" group on my undergraduate campus, and supposedly, never the twain would meet. Yet I'm comfortable in both worlds. I came to IT by countermanding expectations - beginning when many women departed, then appearing to retreat by joining a female-dominated profession, but taking IT roles. In doing so, I've fostered award-winning organizational changes and successes. This is my story, and five lessons I've learned.

In high school, once I could select courses, I chose STEM *and* humanities options. In university, I majored in "co-op" math & computer science, alternating four months of school with four months of work. I worked in Texaco Canada's Management Information Systems unit. Overwhelmingly, my work and school colleagues were male. Did it bother me? No. There were minor issues: the calculus professor, and colleagues who hung posters of buxom women in their office. I hung a poster of a bodybuilder; if they were going to display something unattainable, so would I. They squawked "No regular guy looks like that!" I replied "I don't look like Adrienne Barbeau." Truce – we removed all posters (as intended). Mostly, though, I was well-treated. But the chimera stirred. After two years, I missed humanities. My Texaco colleagues worked overnight for days to meet deadlines for software to help truckers use unstaffed refueling stations. I considered what I wanted from life: this wasn't it. I switched to English, working multiple jobs, including in libraries. I completed an MA and began a PhD, but restlessness recurred. I liked teaching, but not grading. Computers were expanding in libraries. A library career would blend technology and teaching. In 1993, I began an MLS, and took multiple library jobs.

[1] http://www.npr.org/sections/money/2014/10/21/357629765/when-women-stopped-coding
[2] http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2015/06/11/nobel-winning-sexism-in-the-lab/gender-and-racial-bias-is-systemic-in-the-sciences
[3] http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2015/libleadgender/
[4] http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2015/libleadgender/
[5] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chimera, retrieved March 27, 2017.

Upon graduation, in a poor job market, I kept my library jobs, but worked full-time IT jobs - system conversion, support, programming, and managing databases of organ transplant information. I convinced the hiring manager that a librarian with tech skills and familiarity with relational databases could learn Oracle. After interviewing applicants, she said "It'll be easier teaching you Oracle than teaching programmers to coax transplant data from busy surgeons." That was my first lesson in the value of chimera-hood. All tekkies *aren't* lacking social skills, but enough fit the stereotype that I got a job for which I wasn't optimally qualified – and succeeded. **Lesson 1: Value the ability to speak to non-tekkies *and* tekkies. Customer service matters.**

Still, I wanted to be a librarian. I applied for a position at an academic dental library. My technology skills were unusual for 1997 libraries. The dental library still used paper circulation cards; bibliographic records were not linked to physical items. There were three staff – one librarian, two technicians (all female). The assistant dean later told me she reviewed my resume and said "If this one isn't crazy, we're hiring her." **Lesson 2: Highlight technology strengths.** They're increasingly common but still a selling point.

I got the job. I was thirty-one, supervising women twenty and thirty years my senior. Neither was comfortable with technology, but they knew dentistry faculty and students. The first thing I said was "You know more than I do about this place. I know technology, but there's a lot I don't know in other areas; I need to lean on you. We'll work on tech together; for everything else, you're the experts." We instantly became a team. They later told me they'd worried I'd be a haughty tekkie who'd consider them stupid because they didn't "know computers." **Lesson 3: Never talk down.** I stayed 6.5 years, working closely with all-male IT and media units on technology projects.

Over the years, whatever my title, I've always had IT-related roles. In a small college, I worked with the CIO and others on technology projects. In 2005, I became Manager of Collections at Harvard Medical School's Library, eventually also supervising Library IT and Technical Services. My staff nominated me for a leadership award, which I won. My "IT guy" told me I was the best manager he'd had. He said I knew enough tech to understand his work and needs, I knew how to clear paths so he could work without interference, and I trusted him to do the job and only intervened when he needed assistance. **Lesson 4: Hire good people. Trust them to do their jobs.**

In 2006, I became the Associate Librarian for Information Services at Brooklyn College (BC). BC Library's visionary Chief Librarian, Dr. Barbra Higginbotham, was also Executive Director of Academic Information Technologies (AIT). Twenty years earlier, Campus IT and AIT were a single unit. Faculty felt this wasn't meeting their pedagogical needs. When something big happened, like campus networks crashing, academic needs might be slighted. Dr. Higginbotham argued that a) the Library had talented systems staff; b) librarians were faculty and familiar with pedagogy; and c) Campus IT should be split. Campus IT would handle regular IT priorities; the library would expand AIT. When I arrived, AIT was a well-integrated library unit. I assumed liaison responsibilities and established good relations with AIT and Campus IT. When Dr. Higginbotham retired, I became Chief Librarian & Executive Director of AIT. I spent 9+ years at BC, undertaking numerous technology projects. We supported 2300+ Blackboard courses, taught 600+ technology and library instruction sessions annually, developed an online promotion and tenure file system, created a library/IT Entrepreneurship program, and more.

As part of the Entrepreneurship program, we built a resource management system (WIMS), a laptop loan system, an inventory management system, a timesheet system, and more. We shared WIMS freely

with CUNY libraries; 7 adopted it. WIMS won the 2010 Ribaudo Award for Technology Innovation; in 2014, we won another. We helped Guttman College build and host their library website. Then came a unique challenge: scanners. A vendor demonstrated scanners designed not to damage book spines. The cost was about $6000, plus annual fees. We didn't like the price or interface. A staff member said "We could design something better for less." My response? "Go!" This spawns my final advice – **Lesson 5: Don't fear the unknown. If someone tells you something can't be done, don't necessarily believe it.** I'd never heard of libraries going into the hardware business. We did, designing a user-friendly scanner for $2000. We presented at conferences and became equipment resellers. We sold 80+ scanners in 18 months, making about $1000 profit per machine. Vendors noticed; some explored licensing our software. If we'd been able to dedicate more time, I believe we'd have made some small waves. Again, AIT and Campus IT were overwhelmingly male; BC librarians were majority-female. Was it an issue? No. We undertook diversity initiatives, but never for women in IT: perhaps that's an area to explore.

In 2015, I became the Dean of Libraries & Information Resources at the University of North Dakota. I oversee several libraries, and work with people in UND's versions of AIT and Campus IT, and the CIO of the North Dakota University System (NDUS - a coalition of 11 higher education institutions). I serve on the Online Dakota Information Network's Board. Again, I'm bringing new technology projects to a library system, and my dual nature is handy: I speak to people with wide-ranging technology skills. Translating among those worlds is crucial, and my skills "between worlds" are exceptionally helpful. UND had a very traditional library structure, and had not moved into offering the (often technology-heavy) services that characterize many modern academic research library systems. However, a Provost hired in 2013 saw a strong need for change. Retirements in senior library ranks afforded an opportunity, and the "Director of Libraries" position was re-cast as "Dean of Libraries & Information Resources" with a broad mandate to work across campus and into the community.

Since my arrival, I have reorganized the largest library's administrative structure, to allow us to create strong relationships campus-wide and offer many technology-supported services. I redesigned several positions, and hired key staff such as a Digital Initiatives Librarian, a Social Sciences & Scholarly Communications Librarian, a Metadata & Cataloging Librarian, and a new Web Services Librarian. An Assessment Assistant is forthcoming. I created an Assessment Committee, and began our first major collection evaluation; we contracted with Sustainable Collection Services for reporting, data analysis, and other needs. I created the position of Information Literacy Coordinator, promoted a superb librarian, and gave her a mandate to establish new relationships and work with instructional designers on interactive support for learning. Importantly, I've never forgotten my long-ago boss's words, about it being easier to teach technical skills than soft skills. When I hire or promote people, I prefer other chimeras – people with technical aptitude plus strong people skills – and I invest heavily in training.

I have also established strong relationships in areas where they did not previously exist – another area in which my dual skills helped. For example, I'm the first librarian to serve on the Deans' Council. Because of this, I was able to promote to the deans the idea of research tutorials and embedded librarians to help students strengthen their research skills. We piloted this with the College of Business & Public Administration in a series of required courses. Feedback and assessment showed students learned more about key concepts – and so did faculty! I also serve on UND's new Digital & New Media Working Group, which gave me contacts to facilitate planning a Digital Studio in the Library. I also established UND's first Open Educational Resources (OER) Committee, and invited a broad spectrum of participants, including faculty, student government representatives, instructional designers, librarians, and the Directors of the Center for Instructional & Learning Technologies (CILT), the Office of Instructional Development (OID), and the Office of Extended Learning (OEL). We secured start-up funding from the state, then ongoing

funding of $100,000 annually from student government and the Provost. We developed a program of workshops, marketing, and technical and research support for OERs, jointly sponsored by CILT and the Libraries. UND's OERs program is now a state leader; we saved our students over $3 million in just two years. We've now begun building an institutional repository, working with faculty, NDUS IT, the Computational Research Center, and CILT. As well, we're reaching beyond campus, working on digital initiatives with community partners. UND Libraries now have a much-strengthened profile, in technology and beyond.

Interestingly, we've seen changes in terms of women in library IT (and IT generally) here. In my past positions with library technology or IT, staff were largely male. As noted, I was often the lone female. In 2015, UND's Library Systems unit was all male. With one promotion and one departure, we seized the opportunity to redesign the unit and add a position. Our mostly newly-hired unit is now 50% female. So are UND's brand-new CIO, the Director of CILT, and the Director of OEL. Perhaps we're making progress after all.