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Matthew R. Griffis

University of Southern Mississippi, matthew.griffis@usm.edu

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Library Science Education at Southern Miss: A History of Survival and Growth

by Matthew R. Griffis, Ph.D.

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“[Librarianship] belongs to that class of occupations that require general culture, special training in theory and practical experience, including skill in a certain number of manual operations. This, if it is a profession, classes it with medicine rather than with law.”
— Arthur Bostwick, 1929

“The best librarians... are positive, aggressive characters, standing in the front rank of the educators of their communities, side by side with the preachers and teachers.”
— Melvil Dewey, 1876

If a librarian is, as Bostwick (1929, p. 387) and Dewey (1876, p.5) suggest, part technician and part educator, then the synthesis is the librarian as enabler: the one who opens doors for others. We stand for access: bridging, fairness, and empowerment. And although the librarian of the mid-19th century was more of a sentinel, the guardian of a storehouse of knowledge, the emergence of formal librarian education in the later century led the way toward making information and knowledge more accessible. The move toward standardization in the 1920s further legitimized these values, and ensured that the trained, “professional librarian” was part technician, part educator, part storyteller, and even part counsellor: a mixed bag of “helping” skills aimed at making library users more literate, more aware, and more capable of sharing their knowledge with others.

Mississippi has a place in this story. Although libraries appeared in the state as early as 1818 (Halsell, 1975), training for librarians was not available until 1926 at the State Teacher’s College in Hattiesburg, later renamed The University of Southern Mississippi. Southern Miss awarded its first master’s degree in library science exactly fifty years ago, in 1965.

Today the University still offers librarian education programs through its School of Library and Information Science (SLIS), one of the leading LIS schools in the southeastern region. Over the years,

SLIS has successfully adapted to rapidly changing professional and pedagogical standards. In 1980 the School became the first accredited library school in the state, and in 2002 its MLIS degree became one of the first fully-online ALA-accredited master’s programs in the country. Today, students from all over the state, region, country, and abroad prepare for careers as librarians and archivists in the school’s virtual classrooms.

The Origins of a Profession

Before librarianship became a recognized profession, libraries were staffed by people who were understood to be merely “custodians” of books who had done their full duty, as Melvil Dewey (1876) once explained, if they had “preserved the books from loss and, to a reasonable extent, from worms” (p. 5). In ancient times these “custodians” were sometimes tutors for children of nobility but focused predominantly on cataloging scrolls and tablets. By the mid-19th century, library workers included scholars, teachers, and even clergymen. They worked in colleges, social libraries and Mechanics’ Institutes and learned through trial and error (Wilson & Hermanson, 1998).

While archival classes were offered in Europe as early as 1821 (Davis Jr., 1994), formal courses of study for librarians were slower to develop. In 1876 the American Library Association (ALA) was established and began printing the influential *Library Journal*.

The U.S. Bureau of Education published its *Public Libraries in the United States of America: Their History, Condition, and Management* (1876), a report that included some of the earliest “best practices” articles written by librarians on subjects related to library practice. Both events inspired the growth of professional development for those engaged in library work. In 1887 Melvil Dewey opened his School of Library Economy at Columbia University, now considered the earliest of the modern library schools (Davis Jr., 1994). Its inaugural curriculum included courses on book selection, book repair, library administration, and bibliography. By 1900 training institutes were established at Albany, Pratt, Drexel, and Illinois (Rubin, 2010). The Association of American Library Schools formed in 1915, as more library schools emerged. Handbooks and manuals written for novice librarians began to appear, for instance John Cotton Dana’s classic *A Library Primer* (1899).

By 1920, library schools existed in a variety of forms. Some were affiliated with post-secondary, degree-granting schools; some were summer institutes; and some were simply occasional workshops (Bostwick, 1929). After reviewing the progress of their library building program, the Carnegie Corporation of New York shifted their focus from bricks and mortar and toward librarian education (Johnson, 1952). Charles C. Williamson’s landmark report, *Training for Library Service*, funded by the Carnegie Corporation and published in 1923, led to the establishment of an accrediting body within the ALA (Wilson & Hermanson, 1998).

Anna Roberts, William Tracy, and the School of Library Service at Southern Miss

By the 1920s, the need for trained librarians was growing. For instance, it was law in several states that publicly funded libraries employ trained librarians (Bostwick, 1929). Vanderbilt opened its library school at Peabody College in the mid-1920s and similar library training programs emerged in other southern states, which helped answer the call. The prevalence of normal schools also helped, since many of them offered classes in “teacher-librarianship”. And when the State Teacher’s College in Hattiesburg began offering them in 1926, library classes were available in Mississippi for the first time in the state’s history.



Figure 1. College librarian Anna Roberts, 1927. Roberts was the first instructor of library service classes (USM Yearbooks, McCain Library and Archives, The University of Southern Mississippi)

The State Teacher’s College in Hattiesburg opened in 1912 as the Mississippi Normal College. Its first library occupied one room on the second floor of College Hall. Pearl Travis was librarian until 1926. Travis’s replacement, Anna M. Roberts (Figure 1), held degrees from Vanderbilt University and had also studied library service at Peabody College (Pace, 1975). Roberts managed the school’s library and taught library courses to aspiring teacher-librarians who, according to the 1931 bulletin, wished “to prepare themselves to teach in one field and also to take charge of the school library.” The courses were a success. The curriculum included classes on administration, book selection, cataloging, reference, bibliographic instruction, and even a class on “adolescent literature.”

Over her thirty-six years of service to the College, Roberts witnessed much change around campus. In the 1930s the College’s library was moved to the Science Hall (now Southern Hall) and then in 1940 moved to the newly completed Joe Cook Memorial Library building (now Kennard-Washington Hall). The library science program became a part of the School of Education and Psychology in 1957. When the new Cook Library building was completed just three years later it included space for the Department of Library Science (Pace, 1975). In 1962, when the College became The University of Southern Mississippi, Roberts retired from her position. Her replacement was Dr. William Tracy, a graduate of the University of Chicago. Tracy became the third Library Director and was also made chairman of the Department of Library Science.

Changes in the profession were also affecting the growth of the department. New standards released in the early 1950s established the master’s as the basic degree for professional librarians (Bobinski, 2007).

Other library schools were now offering master's degrees; some were even awarding doctorates. Under the school's new accreditation as a university, Dr. Tracy initiated the first graduate library science program at Southern Miss in the fall of 1963 (Pace, 1975). Its first graduates emerged in 1965.

Throughout the 1960s, the Department gained new faculty and grew in reputation. Dr. Lena de Grummond, a professor of library science with a specialization in children's literature, established a teaching collection of manuscripts, artwork, and published children's books. The collection quickly grew in size and renown. Today, now a part of the University's special collections, the de Grummond Children's Literature Collection contains materials from over 1,300 authors and illustrators and over 160,000 books dating from 1530 to present. In 1968, with the cooperation of Dr. Tracy, de Grummond organized the first of what eventually became an annual series known as the Children's Book Festival. The festival awarded its first University of Southern Mississippi Medallion in 1969 to Lois Lenski; past winners have also included Maurice Sendak and Judy Blume.¹ In 1985-86 the Ezra Jack Keats Foundation, in partnership with the New York Public Library, began issuing annual awards to children's writers and illustrators. Since 2012 the University of Southern Mississippi has been co-presenting (with the Foundation) these awards at the annual Children Book Festivals. The 50th annual festival will take place at Southern Miss in spring of 2017.

Despite its successful launch in 1963, the graduate program in library science was not yet a fully-accredited degree program. Under the College of Education and Psychology, the department re-established itself as the School of Library Service in 1976 with Dr. Onva K. Boshears, who had joined the faculty one year earlier, as Dean. With the encouragement of university President Dr. Aubrey K. Lucas (Greiner & Smith, 2012), the new School sought accreditation from the American Library Association, which it received in July of 1980 (Figure 2).



Figure 2. The School of Library Service receives ALA accreditation in 1980. From left to right: Dr. Joe Mika, President Aubrey K. Lucas, unidentified, and Dr. Onva Boshears (Photo courtesy of SLIS)

The School continued to attract new and accomplished faculty. Joseph J. Mika and Dr. Jeannine Laughlin joined the School in the late 1970s. Dr. Antonio Rodriguez-Buckingham, who held a master's from Harvard and a PhD from Michigan, and who had served fourteen years as a librarian at Harvard University, joined the faculty in 1980. Laughlin's specialization was in school media centers and Rodriguez-Buckingham's specialization was in book history and print culture. In 1981, the School began participating in the University's study abroad program, taking students to libraries and archives in Europe.

The late 1980s and early 1990s brought more growth to the School of Library Service (Figure 3). In 1988, it was renamed the School of Library Science and moved to the College of Liberal Arts. Dr. Laughlin, its new director, continued to lead annual study abroad trips for library students until her retirement in the 1990s. In 1991, Dr. Joy Greiner became Director of the School. In 1993, the School of Library Science was renamed the School of Library and Information Science (SLIS) and carries the name to this day.

¹ Among the panelists listed on the 1968 program was one Stan Lee of Marvel Comics.

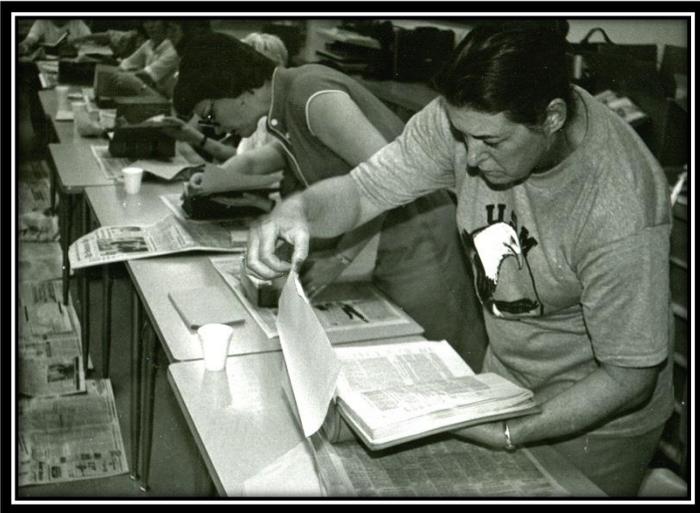


Figure 3. A materials conservation class in session ca. 1982 (Photo courtesy of SLIS)

New Frontiers

In recent years SLIS has increased focus on broadening access to its programs. In the 1990s and early 2000s, through partnerships with the Anthropology, History, and Political Science departments, SLIS began offering dual master's degree programs. It initiated its Graduate Certificate in Archives and Special Collections in 2009 and its Graduate Certificate in Youth Services and Literature in 2013.



Figure 1. A student participating in the SLIS British Studies Program in 2014 (Photo by T. Welsh)

Following in the footsteps of Drs. Laughlin and Greiner, Dr. Teresa Welsh, who joined the faculty in 2003, took over the department's British Studies courses in 2007. The program, which takes MLIS students on tours of libraries, archives and museums

in London, Oxford, and Edinburgh, has accepted library students from many other ALA-accredited MLIS programs across the continent, including students from Simmons, the University of South Carolina, Rutgers, and the University of Toronto (Figure 4).

Since the program at Southern Miss is the only ALA-accredited library program in the state (and one of only about fifty in the country), over the years SLIS has adopted a number of distance learning models to make its classes more accessible to off-campus students. As Norton (2003) and Greiner & Smith (2012) explain, by the early 1990s SLIS was offering library classes in Jackson, Picayune, and Long Beach. By 1995 SLIS was employing a statewide interactive video network (IVN) service. In 1998, SLIS adopted Web Course Tools (WebCT) and began delivering classes through a combination of face-to-face and online methods. In fall of 2002, SLIS launched a fully-online master's program, one of the first in the United States. By 2010 SLIS was one of only sixteen ALA-accredited library schools in North America offering an MLIS degree entirely through some means of distance learning (Rubin, 2010). Today, SLIS programs admit students from all over the state, many from other states, and even some from abroad.

The program has also grown with a steadily strong leadership. In 2000, Greiner handed the directorship of the school to Dr. Thomas Walker. Later Directors have included Dr. Melanie J. Norton (2003-2012) and Dr. Elizabeth Haynes (2013-2015). The School's new Director, Dr. Teresa Welsh, began in July of this year.

Conclusion

Since Anna Roberts's first classes in library service in 1926, the library education program at Southern Miss has grown into one of the leading LIS programs in the South. And at a time when some question librarianship's relevance in the new century, enrollment in SLIS's programs has been steadily increasing. This is not surprising considering its broad array of programs as well as its continued commitment to online delivery. In fact, the MLIS program was Southern Miss's first fully online degree program. Since then, SLIS has become a recognized campus leader in online teaching methods at the University.

At the dawn of the new century, the library and information science education program at Southern Miss will continue preparing students for promising careers in libraries, archives, and special collections. It will, as it has over its ninety years, continue to adopt new methods of broadening access to its many programs and continue to create new partnerships on local, regional, national, and international levels.

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