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# information outlook

THE MAGAZINE OF THE SPECIAL LIBRARIES ASSOCIATION

MEASURING VALUE  
USING RESEARCH  
PRODUCTIVITY AND  
LEARNING OUTCOMES



# 10 Questions: Barbara Burton

SHE'S WORKED WITH INFORMATION AS A SELLER, A CONSUMER, A STUDENT, AND A TEACHER, BUT AT HEART SHE'S A LIBRARIAN WHO'S ALWAYS OPEN TO OPPORTUNITIES.

BY STUART HALES

**F**or all the concern about too much information, much of what's available (especially on the Web) is simply content that has been repurposed—that is, it has been altered to give it a fresh perspective, different purpose, or new format that may appeal to a selected audience. Repurposing enables content producers to lower their costs, expand their reach, and enhance their investment in the information that underlies the content.

Barbara Burton has mastered the art of repurposing, but she's done it with her career, not with content. After earning a library degree from Rutgers University, she started working for information vendors in a variety of capacities, notably marketing, communication, sales, and education. Through it all, she thought of

herself as first and foremost a librarian, even though she wasn't performing duties associated with that role.

"I've rarely acted like a true librarian," she says, "but I still tell people I'm a librarian. It's an identity—it's something that sticks to you that people understand."

Now she's back where she started, at Rutgers, this time pursuing a doctoral degree. This is a repurposing of sorts as well—she had thought about someday earning a doctoral degree in history, her undergraduate major, but instead is earning one in library and information science. *Information Outlook* caught up with Barbara shortly after she took her qualifying exams and asked her about her career, her role in SLA, and why she considers Andrew Carnegie an inspiration for information professionals.

## When did you decide to become a librarian, and why?

I have a bachelor's degree in history, and history has always been my first passion. But when I got my degree, I realized that if I wanted to do something with history, my career was heading toward a PhD. I was ready for a break from academia at that point, and my mother, who was a trustee of our local library here in Westfield, said, "Why don't you go to library school?" So I looked into it, and it seemed like a good thing to do.

I realized also that when you looked in the classified ads, even back then, there was nothing under *H* for *historian*, but there were things under *L* for *librarian*. So it gave me a focus and a way of getting into the workforce and trying things out.

I've rarely acted like a true librarian, because my career went immediately into the vendor side of information, but I still tell people I'm a librarian. It's an identity—it's something that sticks to you that people understand.

**You seem to have a lot of itches to scratch—you're a part-time university lecturer, you're pursuing a doctoral**

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**degree, you're an amateur historian and a student of the early library movement, you've entered local essay contests, and you've worked in positions involving marketing, sales, writing, and training in addition to information and library science. Are you someone who just never really figured out what she wanted to do when she grew up?**

I think that's pretty typical in the current environment—you have to be flexible. My career never followed a particularly straight path.

When I first started my library school program, I wanted to be a reference librarian in a special library. That seemed like it would be an interesting environment to be in. Then, when that didn't happen, I ended up interviewing with the *New York Times* Information Bank, which was a new venture at that time. They were computerizing the morgue, which is what they call the clipped files of the newspaper, and they were looking for people to be abstractors and indexers.

So I thought, well, I'm not coming up with anything as a reference librarian in a special library, so I'll give this a try. That kind of started my career off on a very different path than I had planned, but I enjoyed the work and kept doing it. As opportunities come up, you take advantage of what's in front of you. It's hard to stay with a script these days, especially with the information field changing so rapidly.

**When and why did you join SLA, and how has membership in SLA enhanced your career?**

When I started my first job with the *New York Times* Information bank, they were exhibiting at the SLA conference, so I had my initial exposure then. Somewhere along the line—I don't know if it's still in my membership files somewhere—I became a member of the association. Since I identified myself as a librarian, it seemed like the place for me to be.

It's turned out to be great for my career. I ended up going to many of the annual conferences as a vendor, and I



**Barbara Burton in a classroom at Rutgers University in New Jersey.**

developed a lot of friendships over the years with people who are on the other side of the table. Later I became president of the New Jersey Chapter, and I really enjoyed that a lot. I found running for office to be a good personal experience, because you meet a lot of people, and also a good professional experience, because it really gets you back to your profession, which is important. So I'm a fan of SLA in terms of the things you can learn and the people you can meet in the organization.

**Although you never pursued a PhD in history, you're now enrolled in a doctoral program in library and information science. What made you decide to get a doctorate in library science?**

What happened to my career at Dow Jones was that in 2005, after about 20 years, I was laid off. I was made redundant, as they say in England. It sounds so much nicer that way. *(laughs)*

A PhD was something I had kept thinking about after I finished my degree in history as an undergraduate. I liked the idea of going back to school and pursuing a PhD. So I was teaching

at Rutgers and saw a flyer about the PhD program, and this little bell went off in my head and I thought, maybe now's the time to pursue that.

I enjoy the academic environment, so I decided to give it a try. I've always been interested in the idea of conducting original research and contributing to knowledge in some small way, and it seemed like the moment was there to do it. So I applied to the program, and I started school in the fall of 2009.

**What did you do during the four years after you left Dow Jones and began your doctoral program at Rutgers?**

As is the case with a lot of people who are made redundant, I was hired by Dow Jones as a consultant to perform some of the work that still needed to be done but now there was no employee to do. *(laughs)* So I worked on the newsletter and some of the other marketing efforts I had been involved with as an employee.

At that time I also had some family responsibilities—aging parents and two high school teenagers—so it seemed like a good time for me to give more time to my family, which I'm glad I did. I also got more involved in my community, in the Westfield Historical Society and the Westfield Historic Preservation Commission, and I was able to do some volunteer work that I really enjoyed.



**A volunteer with the Westfield (New Jersey) Historical Society, Barbara leads tour groups such as these Brownie Girl Scouts.**



Barbara is congratulated by Bermuda Governor George Fergusson after completing the 2013 Round the Sound 2K swim.

**At Rutgers, you're teaching undergraduate and graduate students; in some of your previous jobs, you delivered training programs to corporate customers. Would you rather instruct college students or adult workers, and why?**

There are certainly a lot of similarities between the two in terms of presenting information and trying to get it across to people. There are also similarities in the content. The course I teach primarily at Rutgers, in the MLIS Program, is called Principles of Searching, and there's a lot of material that's related to what I was doing in the corporate world.

One major difference is that when you're working with students, they're concerned with their grades; when you're working with adults in business, that element is not there. The students also bring a lot of energy to the classroom, and that aspect is very enjoyable. But the students aren't necessarily all that concerned with the material—a lot of them just want to know what they need to do to get the grade. Of course, in the corporate environment, you'll have people who are attending the training because their boss told them they have to be there, but you'll also have people who are very motivated and who want to learn because it's in

their DNA.

I enjoy the give and take of the learning situation, the in-person, face-to-face contact. At this point, I've never taught an online class. I've had the opportunity to do it—Rutgers has online classes in the MLIS program—but so far I've stuck with the old-fashioned classroom setting because I enjoy the personal interaction.

**You've entered essay contests conducted by your local newspaper, and in 2006 and 2007 you won awards for your essays. Is there a novel or autobiography in your future?**

I would hope so. The next thing I'll be doing in my PhD program is my dissertation, and I think it would be nice to create a dissertation that could be turned into a book. Information is such a fascinating topic right now; it's so incredibly important in today's world. There are physicists who are saying that information is the basis of reality, and there's a lot of discussion going on in terms of the definition of information and what it means to us. So I'd love to create a dissertation that could be the basis of a book about what information is and why it matters so much.

I wrote the pieces for the newspaper

because they were asking for people to write about Westfield's history, and that's one of the things I'm passionate about. I wrote one essay about the beginning of the Westfield library. It was slightly fictional—I created a couple of fictional characters and talked about how the library began. For the other piece, there had been a racetrack in Westfield at one time, so I took that topic and turned it into an essay.

Writing these essays was really for my personal enjoyment, because I like to write. That's one of the things about the PhD program at Rutgers—it syncs well with my interests. It involves a lot of writing and reading, and those are things I enjoy doing.

**In addition to SLA, you've been a member of the Church and Synagogue Library Association, which represents librarians in religious congregations. If you were a full-time church librarian, would you join SLA, and do you think SLA should try to reach out to information professionals who work in religious institutions?**

I think it would make sense to at least have a conversation with church and synagogue library associations. I don't know what synergies there might be—maybe we could create a division for them.

I think a lot of the librarians in churches and synagogues are volunteers, but that doesn't mean they wouldn't want to have the benefits of a professional association like SLA—the ability to talk to other people who are doing the same kind of work and the chance to network and share problems and resources. So if there were a division in SLA that could reach out to librarians in churches in synagogues—I don't know what would happen, but I think it would be something worth trying. They are clearly special libraries; they are very different than public libraries.

One of the things that I find interesting about SLA is that we have a retired members' caucus. Back in the day, when you became a librarian, you were a librarian for your entire career. Today, with people moving around so much

and changing jobs and doing different things, that professional identity doesn't always carry through to your retirement. Joining an association like SLA helps give you that focus.

**Speaking of identities and careers, what insights did you gain while working on the vendor side of the information industry that have helped you in your information career?**

As you know, there's a saying that information wants to be free. It's attributed to Stewart Brand, but the entire quote—I have it in my head because I used it recently for a paper I was writing—is, “On the one hand, information wants to be expensive because it's so valuable. The right information in the right place just changes your life. On the other hand, information wants to be free because the cost of getting it out gets lower and lower all the time. So you have these two fighting against each other.”

Selling information as a commodity puts you opposite the people who think information should be free. It gives you a perspective of trying to put a monetary value on it, and doing that can create a sense of importance in some people's minds. Buying something can make people feel like they're getting something valuable. And when information can be freely passed from person to person, you start to ask yourself whether that, in some way, cheapens it.

Having said that, I am an advocate of free information and Creative Commons and Larry Lessig and all of the stuff he's doing in terms of making information free, but the fact remains that information does cost something to create. Yes, you have Google, the ultimate source of free information, but they're making it up on advertising and through other avenues. You have to account for the cost in some way.

As information has gotten more plentiful, the supply has been outstripping the demand. A while ago, I heard a quote about the Internet that it was like a cocktail party where everyone is talking, but nobody is listening. And on top of that you have copyright laws that

turn information into property that can be sold, and the copyright period keeps getting extended. It's now 70 years after the death of the author, which is quite far from what the original clause in the Constitution was meant to do. Copyright was originally intended to be a short-term thing to help the author recoup some of his costs, but now it has become a cash cow for publishing companies and people who may not even have had a hand in creating the information in the first place.

So you hit this barrier of copyrighted stuff that you can't get.

Right now at Rutgers, I have access to all of those expensive databases that would be completely impossible for me to get to if I were a “regular” person. That's where Creative Commons and those other initiatives come in, and I support them.

**You're earning credits toward a certificate in historic preservation, and you presented a paper a few years ago about early public libraries in New Jersey and especially those started by Andrew Carnegie. What's the most important lesson that today's librarians and info pros could learn from taking a tour of an early public library?**

I'm a big fan of Andrew Carnegie. He was a proponent of the idea that people could educate themselves, as he had done. He wanted to give something back to society after making his fortune, and in some ways he is the father of modern philanthropy.

Carnegie started to give away his money later in life, and one of his pet

projects was public libraries. But he also wanted to make sure that the local community would support the library, so when he gave a library grant, the community had to agree to support the ongoing maintenance of the building



**Barbara and her husband, Allen, show off their medals from the 2013 Round the Sound swim in Bermuda.**

and pay librarians' salaries. He wanted a commitment from the local community. That led to the laws we have now, where your taxes support public libraries.

Some people think of these Carnegie libraries as fancy relics of the past, but he didn't want fancy buildings. He just wanted people to be able to educate and improve themselves by using the library. I sometimes wonder what he would think if he were alive today and saw all of these historic preservationists wanting to save these libraries, because I don't think he cared about the buildings. His mission was providing people with the means to educate themselves, so today he might be setting up high-speed Internet access if that were the best way to achieve his goal of getting information to people.

I think the same thing holds true for librarians and information professional in our current environment—the goal is to get information to people so they can help themselves. The means isn't what's important; the end is what matters. **SLA**