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Interview with Michaelyn Burnette, Humanities Librarian

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This fall the *BUJ* sat down with Michaelyn Burnette, the Humanities Librarian of Doe and Moffitt Libraries at UC Berkeley, to speak about the changes in Berkeley's libraries over the past twenty years. Burnette, a self-proclaimed bookworm, completed her Bachelor's degree in English at the University of Kansas and later earned her Master's of Librarianship from Kansas State Teacher's College. Burnette worked post-grad as a documents librarian at the University of Kansas, where she dealt with official government and international agency publications. Later, Burnette earned her Ph.D from Emory University in English Literature and attained her first role as a Humanities Librarian at Binghamton University in New York. In 1989 Burnette moved to California and began working at UC Berkeley as a librarian, and she has been an integral part of the library staff here ever since. The *BUJ* had the pleasure of asking Burnette questions about her views on changes in library research methods, developments in library processes, and interactions between the campus community and the library.

BUJ: Can you give us an idea of the undergraduate research process twenty years ago?

MB: In 1991, students writing research papers would have approached a card catalogue or an index, not a computer. Indexes, such as the MLA, are volumes containing subject-based bibliographies of books, journals and other useful sources. For example, if you were writing a research paper on Jonathan Swift, you could open the "18th Century Literature" volume, find Swift under the author subject-heading, and there would be a list of scholarly journal articles. For the purpose of finding a book, a student would go to the card catalogue, which organizes books according to the Library of Congress system. Now, though the card catalogues have been replaced by our online system.

BUJ: So the appearance of the libraries has changed a lot in addition to the process of undergraduate research?

MB: Yes, since 1990 physical space in UC Berkeley libraries has changed. The Hastings Library used to be filled with card catalogue cabinets. Students could spend many hours there rifling through cards that would eventually lead to books in Moffitt or Doe. Although Moffitt looks very similar to the way it did twenty years ago, Doe has changed. The core of Doe used to have nine levels of bookshelves with transparent glass flooring. Think about how that must have been during an earthquake!

BUJ: So now instead of these Doe stacks, undergraduates have access to the Main Stacks. Were there any special qualifications for accessing the Doe books?

MB: Yes, in 1990, although anyone could go into Moffitt, undergrads couldn't go into the book stacks in Doe unless they were an honors student or had taken a course from the library school. Of course, now Berkeley doesn't have a library school, but this is in part due to the technology revolution and its major effects on library use.

BUJ: Wow, a library school at UC Berkeley! So it sounds like in the past

twenty years students have gained a lot of access to the library's main collection of books. Have there been any other significant improvements in the accessibility of the library's resources?

MB: Yes, mainly in the way undergraduates can find books. Back in 1991, there were the beginnings of online searching and major databases, such as the MLA. But students had to go through a librarian to access the MLA and it was very expensive. The MLA would charge searches by results and time. I remember doing a fair number of 30 and 75 dollar searches and it was very nerve racking to conduct online searches. You knew you were running up a bill. Now things are less stressful with the development of online search databases. We have Google, Google scholar, Jstor, Project Muse, and bibliography indexes, such as ABE and the MLA. Most of the major indexes published in Europe and the US are available online. Now, there is a problem of too much information, as opposed to not enough information.

BUJ: What are the biggest advantages and disadvantages to conducting research now as opposed to the start of your career, because of changes in technology specifically?

MB: The the biggest difference between conducting research today and conducting research forty years ago is the time it takes. Everything that a library has used to be out on the shelves, which significantly changed the configuration of space in a library- as well as the general atmosphere. I miss getting to physically experience the mass amounts of books in a library while browsing for content. What we have gained in research speed and storage space we have lost in library aesthetics.

BUJ: Not only have you worked in libraries over time, but you have worked in libraries of different sizes. What are the challenges of working at a large research university like UC Berkeley?

MB: At a large research university it is often hard to know where to go for partnerships to bring about change. It is no news to anyone that at a university like Berkeley, everyone is extremely overloaded with work- faculty and staff included. At UC Berkeley, librarians are not senate academics, which means they aren't considered faculty or staff and thus cannot serve on committees and in the University senate. This significantly limits our involvement on campus, as well as our ability to reach out to faculty in the effort to build information literacy into curriculum in other fields.

BUJ: So now that the library's resources are accessible to more people and it's easier to find things, would you say that your job as a librarian has changed as well?

MB: Well, the library staff sees a lot fewer people now. When I first started, the Doe reference desk was double staffed from 9am to 10pm and it was open Saturday and Sunday. Oftentimes students don't come in the library except to study, and as a result now the Doe reference desk is staffed from 1 to 5pm Monday through Friday.

BUJ: So what do you wish that Berkeley undergraduates knew about 21st-century librarians?

MB: Our main concern as librarians is helping people get to the information they need. Even though Google is a good source, the library is spending millions every year licensing resources that go beyond Google. Librarians who have built the collections, like the MLA and OSKIcat, know the tools that can best help students, faculty and staff. We would like to see more students at the reference desk. We want to help.

BUJ: How has the university administration affected the libraries during the past twenty years?

MB: Certain administrations that come from humanities backgrounds generally give more financial support to the libraries. That said, there hasn't been an increase in our collection budget for eleven years. This is difficult when libraries now deal with increases in journal subscription costs. For example, a print journal published a few years ago at \$25 now costs \$300 online due to changes in online publication. However, this library has been very lucky compared to the other University of California schools because people have fought to maintain the collection. Today the campus administration and library administration are making changes in order to become more efficient. Right now we're in the process of making arrangements for doing a UC-wide share of print projects, in which single subscriptions to journals can be shared throughout the UC system.

BUJ: You are absolutely a wealth of information on research and libraries in general! Do you have any advice for future librarians, or current students who want to get more involved with the libraries at Cal?

MB: Many librarians were on the cusp of retiring, but because of budget cuts fewer and fewer jobs are becoming available so it takes having a specialty to stand out from the crowd of new graduates. The best way to stay connected to employment opportunities is to be relentless about checking job listings. Work study positions are available as well as opportunities to volunteer and participate in focus groups. The University is interested in using students as a resource for the library as it evolves, so student input is extremely desired by the library system. Because the nature of research has changed, now is an incredible time to be studying at a research university. However, this advancement in technology is a double-edged sword. Librarians still serve a valuable purpose though in navigating the vast amount of resources that are available to researchers. The best thing to remember is that librarians are people whose purpose in life is to serve the research community by offering the best content in the least amount of time. Take advantage of their presence here on campus to keep them as vital to our education as they have always been!