

Access Interviews

An Interview Column by June L. Power

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Though it goes by many names, virtually every library has an Access Services or circulation department, meaning that we have a lot of colleagues out there. There are many people working in Access Services in various types of libraries all over the United States and abroad and many of us talk, if not every day, sometimes quite frequently. A good portion of this communication takes place through electronic discussion lists, and many of us have been able to make friends without ever meeting someone face to face, and sometimes in the mix, there may be things about a person that we miss. Hopefully this column will help us to get to know each other a little better. If you know anyone we should all get to know better, or if you yourself want to be interviewed, please write and tell me why and they could appear here in future editions. I look forward to meeting more of you.

Meet Kimberly Burke Sweetman

Kimberly Burke Sweetman is the author of the Neal-Schuman book, *Managing Student Assistants: a How-to-do-it Manual for Librarians*, and the co-writer of *Access Services* with Trevor A. Dawes and Catherine Von Elm. I contacted Ms. Sweetman to discuss professional publishing, as well as to ask some questions about working with students, the inspiration for her book.

Kimberly obtained her Masters in Library and Information Science from The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. She has held a number of positions in libraries world wide, including working at Emory University's Health Sciences Library interlibrary loan department, the loan division of the Library of Congress, as a reference librarian at a small public health policy project center in Georgetown, and as the Assistant Library director of an offshore medical school. She returned to the states to become head of the interlibrary loan department at New York University's Bobst Library, where she was later asked to become the Head of the Access Services department, which includes about 40 full-time staff members.

In addition to the regular duties you expect of someone working in access services, Ms. Sweetman also functions as the selector of library science related materials and is very involved in assessment. She states that she thinks "it's really important to make decisions based on some kind of fact, rather than based on a single user or staff suggestion."

Before getting into the details of academic publishing, I asked a few questions just to get to know Kimberly a little bit better. After these initial questions, I began to ask questions related to the writing and publishing of Ms. Sweetman's book. I was interested in finding out not only more about the publication, but about the impetus behind the book and the experiential knowledge upon which it is based.

What is one thing you would like to change about your library's Access Services department?

This question makes me reflect on the changes that I have made over the years, which include bringing together a department that formerly functioned as essentially 5 distinct, independent units; streamlining the organizational structure of the department; creating new positions; and automating many tasks and services.

Going forward, I would like to create more of a service culture. Our organizational culture has historically focused on protecting the collection rather than serving our users. Access Services staff, and occasionally supervisors, sometimes have the first instinct to protect the books, rather than make the library an inviting, usable place for students and faculty. I'm working to balance that, but it will take some time.

If you weren't working in Access Services, what library department would you want to work in and why?

Although our library doesn't have either of these departments, I think I'd like to work in either library assessment or training & development. Also, outside of work I really like craft projects, so I'd probably find being a book conservator really rewarding.

I understand you have international library experience. Where abroad did you work and how did it compare to working in the U.S.?

I worked at a library at an offshore medical school in the Commonwealth of Dominica in the British West Indies. My title was Assistant Library Director, but basically I was the Access Services/Facilities Manager. My role was to manage a large contingent of Dominican library staff (who generally worked at the circulation/reserve desk) and a moderate contingent of American medical students who worked in the computer lab. Since neither faculty nor students had any research responsibilities, in some ways it was also like managing a big study hall. The challenges were things like power outages, floods, and vermin infestations, although the type of patron problems we all encounter (fine disputes, complaints about staff, and noise complaints) were issues there as well. The experience gave me lots of practice in management, and I learned to be much more accepting and understanding of cultural and individual differences.

Dominica was a wonderful place to live. I learned a tremendous amount about, and fell in love with, West Indian culture. I had never lived abroad before, so it was a wonderful way for me to challenge some of my problem solving skills (no chocolate chips on the island? Buy a Cadbury bar and chop it up for the cookies...). Both the Dominican and Ex-Pat community were incredibly welcoming to me. While I haven't been back to Dominica since I left almost 10 years ago, I am still in contact with several of my friends from my year there. Though it was tough living there at times, I wouldn't trade my time there for anything.

"If you have an idea, by all means pursue publication! Articles and books don't need to be perfect, just written."

What inspired you to write and publish *Managing Student Assistants*?

Like many library managers, my management skills are almost completely self-taught. I learned a lot through my own mistakes, and wanted to share what I have learned with others. I think students are a valuable asset to libraries for a number of reasons, and I also found it really frustrating to hear other library managers complain that student workers were not worth the effort.

The biggest misconception about student workers is that training student workers is not worth the effort because of the high turnover. I think this reasoning is backwards: properly training students ensures that they will be more comfortable in their jobs, and are therefore likely to last longer. I think we owe it to our student workers and our profession to have well organized student worker programs that help employees to be as productive as possible.

What do you like best and least about working with students?

One of the things I like best about working with students is watching them learn and grow as young adults. I particularly love watching them develop an appreciation for library work; two of the students I supervised have gone on to library school, and three others are career non-librarian professionals.

The occasional bad-hire is probably what I like least. We recently terminated a student worker who just didn't seem to want to work, and was also kind of lippy about it. That was pretty disheartening for me.

These days I don't work as closely with the students as I once did. I still like to check in with students about their academic progress, and occasionally ask for their feedback on various library services and programs.

Describe the publication process – did you write first or find a publisher first? How did your book come to fruition?

I teach a lot of workshops through local library councils and other professional development providers. One of the courses I developed is on the topic of managing student workers. To my great surprise, Neal-Schuman publishers contacted me about writing a book for their "How-To-Do-It" series. Honestly, I was pretty flattered by it, and never even considered saying no.

What are the rewards of academic publishing?

I find that many new librarians are intimidated by the process, but if you think about it, the publishers *want* to publish articles, so they will work with you to get the information out there.

It is really rewarding for me to see my name in print, and I like to think I've made a lasting imprint and contributed to a profession I am committed to. I also like the idea of helping people to learn. Recently, I collaborated on two projects (one was an ARL Spec

Kit on Access Services, which I wrote with Trevor Dawes and Cathy Von Elm, and the other was a conference presentation with my boss). Both were incredibly rewarding experiences and I learned a tremendous amount from my collaborators. Most importantly, though, I learned how to successfully collaborate on a research endeavor, which is something I was always a little intimidated by.

**How does academic publishing fit into your job description?
Are you tenure track and publishing is part of the process?
Are you able to allot work time towards publishing efforts,
or is this something you must do on your own time?**

My job is tenured. I was fortunate enough to receive a sabbatical during the summer of 2005 to work on the Student Worker book and finish-up the Spec Kit. Before I got tenure most of my writing was done on my own time, but the research, being work related, was often done at work. I still do some research and writing on my own time. My friend Nadaleen Tempelman-Kluit, our instructional design librarian, and I get together once per week for what we call "homework club." It's kind of a nerdy concept, but it keeps us on track with our various extra-curricular commitments and interests. Lately I have tried to carve out a couple of hours per week in my calendar for research and writing. I don't always honor it, but I think it's a worthwhile strategy.

In what way can your book be useful to library personnel working in Access Services in different types of libraries?

I don't think that managing students is really that different from managing anyone else in a library. While my book does have some information specific to academic libraries (for instance, on financial aid), most of what I included is applicable to managing students in any type of library. In fact, I think it makes for a decent basic, no-nonsense management book even for those who manage non-students.

If you could pass on one great piece of advice about academic publishing, what would it be?

JUST DO IT! The idea of academic publishing is intimidating, but it's a simple rule of the marketplace that publishers need books and articles to publish. If you have an idea, by all means pursue publication! Articles and books don't need to be perfect, just written.