An Interview with Lynn Silipigni Connaway

Lynn Silipigni Connaway, Executive Director, Research at OCLC
With Megan E. Welsh (Union College) and James Estes (Library of Congress)

Dr. Lynn Silipigni Connaway offered the closing plenary address at Atla Annual 2024. Dr. Connaway is Executive Director, Research, at OCLC. She is the 2023-2024 Follett Chair at Dominican University and has received the 2020 Distinguished Alumna Award of the Information School at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the 2019 ASIS&T Watson Davis Award for Service, and the 2016 ALISE Service Award, among numerous other honors. She is the co-author of the sixth edition (2017) and seventh edition (2021) of *Research Methods in Library and Information Science* and contributed to *Library 2035: Imagining the Next Generation of Libraries*, as well as other titles. For more information, visit *https://www.oclc.org/research/people/connaway-lynn_silipigni.html*.

Dr. Connaway met with Atla members Megan E. Welsh and James Estes after Atla Annual to further explore the themes she discussed in her plenary address. The following interview has been edited for clarity and length.

You've mentioned that libraries are often reactive instead of proactive. What are your suggestions for library leaders to shift from a reactive approach to a more proactive one?

Leaders—everyone—should always be observing, and reading, and seeing what's happening around us. And one of the things that I've always said is that we should be studying, observing, paying attention to the behaviors of the four-year-olds. See what technologies they're engaging in, how they interact, if it's virtual or in-person, and how they engage in games, so that we can start to think about how we develop our offerings in libraries and in higher education, to engage these new students as they come through.

Research indicates that individuals do not pick up every new technology or every new gadget; it's dependent—you're going to hear me say this a lot!—upon context and situation, familiarity, convenience, and what their peers are using. I remember when my

niece (who's now sixteen) was four; we were sitting watching her sisters in a swim meet. She was bored and she took my phone; and started playing some games. Well, I have never played a game on my phone. She started playing the game, and she said, "Here, now you do it." I was trying to do it and, obviously, it wasn't the way you were supposed to do it. And she said, "Oh, Aunt Lynn, give me that phone! Let me show you how to do this." So that's when I started thinking, *Here she is, four years old, and she is so adept at using this phone for gaming*.

That's part of her learning. To this day, she's constantly on that phone doing things; or I'll say, "Don't you have homework?" [She'll respond:] "Oh yeah, I'm doing it!" It's a constant engagement with this phone. (To this day I still don't know how to play games on a phone!)

This parallels what colleagues say on social media about graduating high school students: "these are their learning behaviors. Get ready: in five or six years these will be our students! Don't be surprised when you see this type of learning behavior in five or six years."

That's it! And there's some things you can't anticipate. I don't think any of us ever thought that we would have an international pandemic and it would change everything. But again, we did adapt, and quickly! Because we had to!

In Library 2020, you discussed how libraries will need to meet their users when and where they are. This was incredibly prescient given the COVID-19 lockdowns. Since the lockdowns, multiple industries have embraced hybrid modalities, but in Library 2035 you still talk about the library as a place, both virtual and physical. There's still a need for onsite work while other work can be done remotely. How can library leaders strive for empathy and equity in distributing requirements and flexibilities?

That's a great question. When we conducted some interviews recently with library leaders along with managers and frontline staff, we heard about the inequities of these hybrid work environments. The individuals who have to be in the library at a desk or in a service area cannot work from home. It's very difficult. And so they feel that their needs are not being met or it's not equitable. And when you think about it, it isn't.

I mentioned this to one library leader who said, "You know, the administrators, many of us, work at home. But we *can*. But others have chosen these positions, to be in the front. So that's their responsibility."

Now, not all leaders talk like that. Some have looked at their organizational charts, and they trained individuals for different positions so that there is job sharing, so there are opportunities for others to work remotely instead of always face-to-face. Others flatten their organizational charts, which helps with this, but it doesn't happen overnight. And some of us are very possessive of our positions, what we do and where we have the knowledge and expertise.

I'm not saying take someone out of where they are or what they know and just plop them somewhere else. This has to be very thoughtful, and it also requires a lot of communication, a lot of planning, training, and education. We can do that and choose to make changes; or you have to just be upfront in the beginning—and again it's all about transparency and communication—and say, "those of you who have selected to be in certain positions, you have to be here in person." But again, it's not going to happen overnight; and it takes planning. Some leaders have done this effectively.

Do you have any comments about transparency as it applies to position descriptions, the hiring process, or workload distributions?

That's a good question. One of the things I've noticed as we were looking at posted positions to see what the trends are right now (the names of the positions and what's required) is that some of them don't indicate the salary, and I think that's really *not* a good idea. This is a big issue when you talk about equity, because if you're looking for a position, you know what you're making now. And why would you want to make some big move (which is expensive, and can be traumatic to move to a different area, place, position), if you go through the whole process and then you find out that the salary is not even at the salary where you are at this point?

In the job descriptions, some employers will put "hybrid." To me, that means "I can live anywhere" and come in at certain times at my own expense. But when others have applied and gone through the process and start negotiating, *hybrid* means you live in that community. You may work remotely, one or two days. In these job ads,

we need to spell it out and it's only fair. It's fair to the applicants, and it's also fair to the search committee. Here you are spending all this time and energy and money to recruit and to hire, and if you don't specifically state what the requirements are, you have wasted everyone's time and energy.

Thank you for bringing up pay transparency. It is a big topic right now and so important.

In your vision for the future of libraries, you specifically use the term agile, which is a buzzword we hear quite often. It is heavily used in tech as a project management methodology with a very specific philosophy. I'm wondering if you can help unpack what agile means for libraries and how you would deploy an agile methodology in libraries.

I always quote Brian Mathews. He talks a lot about thinking like a startup [Mathews 2012]. Don't just think, "we're always just often focused on services;" think about *people*. The reason we are in business is to give individuals what they need when they need it. And to be agile—back to that context and situation—our needs can change within an hour. So we, as librarians, need to pay attention to those users and then those prospective users, those who aren't using us—there's a reason why. We really need to be able to identify what they need, and we need to be able to change, too.

I mean, how many times have I worked on something and said, "This isn't working. Could we try whatever?" And the response was, "No, we've always done it this way. It works. You don't know. You're new, and you don't know." I think we just have to be able to move and test. (I'm not saying drop everything.) The beauty of research is that we could try this; and if it doesn't work, we learned that it's not going to work; but we may have learned what changes we *can* make, in order to make what we're doing better. If we can say, "Let's just change one little thing, maybe one day a week. Move somebody here or do this." And if it's working and there's pickup, then we can move along and start transitioning to that. There are some things that we should just stop doing. To be agile, to me, brings in a lot of other words: *flexibility*, *transitioning*, *testing*, *uncertainty*. Being able to say, "It didn't work. I was wrong." All these things, to me, are packed into *agile*.

You try something, you learn from it, and you move on and adapt and you're flexible in that way.

It's very hard. I'll tell you: you can look at some of the things we've done, and I can say, "We failed." But, instead, I just say, "It didn't work and here's why. So don't do that." Then when we try it again, we tweak it. Ultimately, it's not a failure.

Librarianship has demanded this sort of adaptability even before we had to name it as such. Often there is this perception that libraries do what libraries have always done: open your box, you get your book, you catalog it, you shelve it. People don't realize how things are constantly in a change of flux and the workflow that we had three years ago no longer satisfies. Everything changes and we're constantly adapting to it, and as you have suggested, anticipating what's going to be coming down the road.

A friend once said, "We make things look easy." And people don't realize everything that goes into this transition, or this change, or this new offering. And that's a problem! It will work or we will do things on weekends, and she said that's an issue. We make it look easy, like it's just, "Oh yeah. We did this, but then we just came up with that."

Most people in librarianship are there for what we do. I don't think many of us are driven by money. And if so, I want the job they have! But it's a very different professional calling. And so we don't think about, "What's this doing to me?" That's just not in our make-up.

And making things look easy is really not beneficial to us, and we're all guilty of it. All of us.

Your vision of the future, the library as an institution that's locally engaged with the community, is compelling and speaks to a lot of present needs. You noted an increase in public libraries lending devices and materials that support patrons beyond just their need for books, and this was amazing. Atla's libraries focus on their institution's educational mission. But many of our patrons are students, and they can have a lot of these same issues in terms of food security, social isolation, and mental health. Being a graduate student doesn't suddenly make them immune. In fact, it makes them even more vulnerable. How can

smaller academic libraries with only one or two staff move toward this comprehensive vision of community support?

That's a very good question. I was visiting the University of Tennessee, and they gave me a tour of the library and it was finals. And the students were lined up . . . to get into the library! And the library said, "What we've learned from statistics on campus is that many students have a lot of issues, like emotional mental issues. What the Library has done is bring in the therapy dogs. And that was finals week: The therapy dogs are there, and the students were waiting to come in for that. And you think about that, and that's something so easy and simple to help the students.

I know that in other academic libraries they make special provisions for leaving the library open, just certain parts of the library. And this really came up in the pandemic because there are many students who don't have a home, who are living in their cars, or on the streets. And to provide some space for them is critically important.

With the food insecurities: We heard that some academic libraries require staff to be part of some community agency or association or some type of community service. And it's part of their work week! (And of course this could involve unions, so you have to be very careful about how you do it.)

Also, having other community agencies in a library. They do this in our library; they worked with social services. They'll have someone there who isn't there to counsel them but can help the individuals in the community and in this academic community find places for food, to live, if you need help with clothing, shelter, all these things. So have someone there! It's just another reference source. Again, it's partnering.

It's so critical now because resources are slim. To partner with other community agencies, to have someone there that can help them. I know we have clinics here in our town where you can go for testing or for medical needs if you do not have insurance. But just knowing about that is really helpful. So maybe you can't get someone from the community to be there all the time or even some of the time. Have the information there! The key is providing these sources, these resources.

Also, we need to think about that in a virtual environment as well, and to make some of these resources available on the library's web page because, as we know, some people may not go into our buildings. But they will use our resources online or go to our website.

That reinforces the notion of the library as a center for community. The next question is about context. You've mentioned it a few times and we appreciate your emphasis on moving beyond counting outputs in favor of understanding the library in the life of the user, in order to better tell our story and communicate our value. Do you have any suggestions for how our libraries can make that transition from statistics to story?

My colleague Kate McDowell does a lot in this area. She's been funded externally by IMLS [Institute of Museum and Library Services]. And I heard Kate talk a lot about this and I've read her work. We still need to have numbers. But you need to know what you're counting, and *why* you're counting it. And when you're telling that story, who's your audience? Let's face it, every library is vying for funds with every other academic department and every other support service on campus. When you're trying to get funding for library-wide programming resources, you need to have some numbers. But you need to also know who you're talking to and what you want. And then, with those numbers, tell a story. If you can, also add a story from a student, a faculty member—those life experiences support that story.

When I first started doing research, my colleague Marie Radford and I did a lot with virtual reference. We would get these great quotes from both librarians and users of virtual services. And so we started putting those in our writing and in our presentations to really exemplify what we're saying. It really, really helps. And our CEO has asked me, "what was that quote about? Can you find that? Give me that. I want to use it." Because it does tell a story. Going back to Brian Mathews: it's all about relationships, and you need to know who you're speaking to or with, and when it's your community members. And that's the story of the impact you have on your students, your faculty. And that speaks volumes, as you know, to the administration.

And that's putting these life experiences out there that show the impact, which is very hard to measure in libraries. We are always surrounded by key performance indicators. How will you make a

difference? But those stories, that's our impact: Individuals telling us, so we can tell others how we've made a difference.

This is a little different, but when we were collecting data for the opioid project, we interviewed directors, frontline staff managers, recovering addicts, those who have been affected by family or friends with this crisis. Public libraries had to partner with somebody within the community, with some other agency. We talked to those same individuals, and what hit me was this recovering addict who said, "just having someone there to say, we're doing these things within our community, with these other agencies—that made me feel like I was a person." That was it. *Making me feel like I was a person when no one else will even look at me.* And that had so much impact.

This is making me think about one of my first Atla conferences. I attended the session on assessment; it was very serious and about numbers. And in the Q&A at the end I asked, "How do you measure fun?" How do we measure those other affective qualities, in ways that that we're impacting our patrons. Are we a space that's safe, that's accessible? Do we provide a sense of joy and fun for our users?

Yes, and the only way you get to that is by talking to those individuals. And I think it's critically important. We had a study about discovery. We asked the participants, "What was joyful about this experience?" And someone said, "Why did you ask that question?" And I said, "What worked? What was delightful?"

I got it from Susan Dumais at Microsoft Research. She and I had given keynotes at a conference. And then we started talking, and so I said I'm going to try that line: "What was delightful about this experience?" And sometimes it's nothing, but that's okay. That tells you something too. But other times it's some tiny little nugget that you never thought of.

One key aspect of your work in Library 2035 is relationship building. Atla is an association for religion and theology libraries and librarians with a wide range of members, from small solo-librarian institutions to large multi-staff and multi-campus institutions. Can you talk more about collaboration and partnership building within the context of participating in an association?

It's that buying power. I think that's something we can't forget, that financial aspect. Because you can get better discounts, better deals, and more access to resources by having this association. There are other theological associations that are international, and partnering with them is important as well, because we are a global economy no matter what.

Also, collaboration. One of the studies we're working on now is the shared print monographic collections. You can go together, if you want a storage facility or if you want digitization projects. You want access! Access was the number one reason for smaller academic libraries to participate in shared print programs. And how do they participate? Through some type of consortium. These are all things that your association brings to you.

My mother always said, "Misery loves company." But you do want to talk to people. You may think that your challenges are unique to you; and it's really great to have colleagues you can talk to who are experiencing the same joys and the same challenges that you are. And collaboratively, collectively, you can possibly come up with some solutions. They won't be perfect. But again, working together as a group can really help in these areas.

And you can bring in faculty, especially junior faculty. They always need projects because they have to publish and get tenure. Develop a relationship. You can bring them into some of your projects. And not just for you, for one library, but for the whole group. The partnering is critical in multiple ways; and at a global level, we need to start thinking globally: some countries are often ahead of us if you look at open access, the UK and the Netherlands especially. We can learn and work with them. With information literacy, Australia was the leader. And, again, we can work with them, and learn, and make things better. I just think that Atla is a great starting point for this.

If I had to use jargon from our industry, I would say that's actually a great altar call for participation in an association—membership, belonging to an association, we move together more successfully as a group.

We have reached the end of our questions. Is there anything else you want to end with?

I was very impressed with Atla. I have known about it because of my relationship with the former executive director [Brenda Bailey-Hainer] and with Gillian [Cain]. (It's that Colorado connection there.)

But I was really impressed—with the members who were there, the excitement, and the engagement, and you don't see that often. I go to a lot of conferences, and you don't see that everywhere, but you could feel that, and I'm really impressed and I'm so glad that I was invited to do this! I was really happy that I was able to join you, and actually honored to be invited. I was just really impressed with everything, the membership, the enthusiasm!

We are grateful to Dr. Connaway for her plenary presentation at Atla Annual, for her suggestion to meet in a subsequent interview, and for the time spent in that conversation.

REFERENCES

Mathews, Brian. 2012. "Think Like A Startup: a White Paper to Inspire Library Entrepreneurialism." Virginia Tech. *http://hdl.handle.net/10919/18649*.

Connaway, Lynn Silipigni. 2013. "Meeting the Expectations of the Community: The Engagement-Centered Library." In *Library 2020: Today's Leading Visionaries Describe Tomorrow's Library*, edited by Joseph Janes: 83–88. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.

Connaway, Lynn Silipigni. 2024. "We are Not Alone: Libraries Making a Stronger Impact in a Global Community." In *Library 2035: Imagining the Next Generation of Libraries*, edited by Sandra Hirsh: 63–68. London: Rowman & Littlefield.