CHAPTER 2

Dr. Susan Gibbons, University Librarian and Deputy Provost for Collections and Scholarly Communication, Yale University

Introduction
Founded in 1701, and named in recognition of a British East India Company Governor, Elihu Yale, Yale University is the third-oldest university in the United States. In addition to its nonresidential Gothic-style architectural buildings on campus, Yale University is also famous for producing a great number of notable alumni and faculty members, each distinguished in their respective fields, that is including Royalties (e.g., Crown Princess of Sweden), United States Presidents (e.g., George W. Bush and Bill Clinton), as well as actors and directors (e.g., Oliver Stone, Meryl Streep, Jodie Foster, and Susan Sigourney Weaver, etc.).

Managing the overall library services and operations of this Ivy League research university, with such an unparalleled history and reputation is Dr. Susan Gibbons, who became the University Librarian in 2011, and was appointed Deputy Provost for Collections and Scholarly Communication in 2016. Prior to joining Yale, Dr. Gibbons worked in a number of different library positions at the University of Massachusetts and the University of Rochester. Being a Medieval History major, Dr. Gibbons did not decide to choose librarianship as a lifelong career for practical reasons until she was in her mid-20s. In the following interview, Dr. Gibbons shares with the readers, how the current information landscape is reshaping service provision by the Yale University Library, as well as the kinds of qualities that they look for in young recruits who wish to join the Yale University Library team.

Could we begin this interview by first introducing yourself—for example, your professional training and background, what did you study at university, and do you come from a family of librarians?
My name is Susan Gibbons, and I am the University Librarian and Deputy Provost for Collections and Scholarly Communication at Yale University. My professional training includes a Master’s in Medieval History, Master’s in Library Science, a professional MBA, and a doctorate degree in Higher Education Administration. I liked going to school and did so for a long time.

My mother was a librarian, so I had to grow up in libraries. It was my sort of “day-care center” when I was a girl. It was a natural place for me to go.

Did you have other careers, say, in nonlibrary businesses before choosing a career in librarianship?

No, I had been studying to be a medieval historian, but while in school, I realized that it wasn’t going to be a viable choice for me, so I quickly switched over to libraries. I went directly from college into a Master’s program in Library Science.

At what stage in your life did you choose librarianship as your lifelong career? Was it a choice of practicality or was it a burning desire or passion towards a librarianship?

That would have been around age 22. It was more practical: something I knew since I had worked in libraries before, so I was very familiar with it. I also knew that I wanted to stay in a university environment—I really enjoyed the intellectual engagement of that. It seemed like a practical way to remain at the university other than being a professor was to work in libraries. That was what drew me in.

Could you describe your current roles and areas of responsibility as the University Librarian at Yale University?

I have been in this role for about five and a half years. I oversee the library system of Yale University, which is the second-largest academic library in the country. There are about 500 members of staff—it is about 50/50 between professional staff and what we call clerical and technical staff. We have a collection of about 14 million volumes, and we have a very large archival collection—it is about 30 miles if you put all of the paper together. We are also responsible for about a petabyte (1 million gigabytes) of digital materials as well. In this role, we make sure that we’re serving all of the needs of our university. They have many schools (humanities, arts, architecture, management, medicine, and all that) and our job is to make sure that all that can be supported through their collections.

1 Yale University—Homepage. Available from http://www.yale.edu/.
How do you divide your time at work since you are performing multiple roles?

I spend about 1 day a week fundraising for the library. That is not raising money from the university, but from graduates of the university, foundations, and things like that. Much of that money goes to projects that upgrade the physical facilities of the library. Then, I spend another day of the week worrying about the budget of the library and trying to make sense of that. By that, I mean the library has a lot of endowments—we have over 700—some of them have very broad use for the library collections, and others are very specific, like for books written in shorthand. I have to find a way to navigate this stream of income from 700 different sources and find a way to meet the needs of the university. There is a lot of work in the financial analysis.

So there are those among your staff who are not library staff, but they are marketing or fundraising staff who devote all of their energy into fundraising and managing finances?

Yes, we have one person who does just fundraising, we have one person who does marketing and communication, and then about four or five people who make up what we call our business office to handle the finances—both on the planning of the budget as well as the processing of invoices, making payments, and all of that.

Given the current economic situation in the United States, has fundraising become increasingly difficult?

In general, it’s a little bit harder, but the alumni of the university are quite loyal, so there is a practice and a habit and expectation that they will give. In some ways, it’s easier than trying to raise money elsewhere.

Would you say that the fundraising practices of Yale University or other academic institutions, compared with museums, would have any major differences or similarities?

I don’t think that there would be major differences, but it’s easier for a university in that it’s very clear who its constituents are. In other words, you hold a degree and there’s a sense of wanting to give back—that degree opened up doors for you, and you want to make sure that the next generation has that same opportunity. I think it is much easier than a museum, whose constituents are whoever walked through the door that day.

Regarding your job as the University Librarian versus being the Deputy Provost of Collections and Scholarly Communications, how are they different?

By Collections, what we are referring to there are all of the collections at Yale University, and that is where the museums come in. In that Deputy Provost role, what I am trying to do is to help coordinate the
activities of the three museums with the library. So, things like digital asset management, IT infrastructure, and repositories—those we could have common platforms and could share digital studios and things like that—trying to get all of the collections at Yale to work together. That is what the Collections piece refers to, not just libraries. On the Scholarly Communications side, that is referring to that Yale University Press reports to me.

_Do these two roles often complement each other or create conflict of interest?_

Sometimes there is a conflict of interest. For instance, libraries benefit when university presses sell their material at a lower price and, on the flip-side, the press has to make money in order to survive, so it makes sense for them to raise their prices and libraries pay more. I sit right in the middle of those two conflicts. But, the way it complements is if we think about the future of scholarly communications within the academy, you have the publishing that happens by the press—it’s the library acquiring that material, and then, the Deputy Provost role puts me in the Chief Academic Officer’s portfolio. There, that’s where decisions about tenure and promotion are happening. So, in some ways, I get to see the entire cycle on campus from those three views.

_Could you describe your affiliation with the Yale University Art Gallery, and the other three museums and art center?_

Those three museums are the largest on campus—we have some smaller ones as well. They are two art museums and a natural history museum. There, what I try to do, as I was saying before, is to bring us together and think of the common things that we share. So, for example, at all of Yale University, our faculty and students can teach with collections. So, you don’t just read about it in a textbook—you can actually work with the collections themselves. So, ideally we would create a discovery system where you could search across all university systems at Yale University, and not have to search individually. That would be an example of a strategic plan that we’re trying to put together with all of the collections.

_Could you give a brief introduction of the history and student population of Yale University and its library services?_

Yale was founded in 1701, so it’s relatively old for the United States, but young for the rest of the world. How Yale was started was that a group of 12 ministers came together and brought their books together.
and said that by bringing these books together, they wanted to found a college for the state of Connecticut. So, what that means is from the very beginning of Yale’s history, books and the library have been a part of it. So, it’s a very strong tradition of having a library at Yale University because of that sense that it was at its founding.

For the student body, there are about 5,400 undergraduate students (students getting Bachelor’s degrees) and another 5,000 students getting graduate degrees. So, we are one of the smaller Ivy League schools in the United States by having a student body of less than 11,000.

*Do you think that Yale University’s long history has become a challenge to you as a librarian to implement services and manage the collections?*

Because we have such a long history, sometimes we are heavily tied to it. So, it can be a little difficult to introduce new services like data management or digital preservation services because we keep being brought back to our history, and our history is print and physical collections. Another challenge is that because the library has been there since the beginning—our buildings are quite old yet are seen as these historic monuments. So, being able to change your library in order for it to respond to today’s needs is quite challenging as well.

*Do you mean extending the physical building or just renovating the interior design?*

It is mostly renovating the interior. One of our buildings is designed to look like a Gothic cathedral. So, it is very hard to put in computers and technology into a church. We try to be respectful of the most historic of the spaces, but then try and put in spaces on the sides that we can actually put the technology in. When we do put the technology in, we spend extra time to integrate it rather than just add air conditioning to a space—we are going to hide all of the mechanics behind wooden screens and things like that so that it doesn’t feel like it is modern. We have to, in some ways, keep this historic feel to it. We have to make sure that it continues to look beautiful and give that feel of a very traditional and stately university. We think about it as there’s a certain scholarly gravitas that is expected of the library. So, how to bring in technology and collaborative study space and even a café into a space while, at the same time, upholding this space as being serious—that’s the challenge.

*Could you describe the current size of the library collections and also the highlights of the collections and services?*

As I said before, our collection is about 14 million volumes and 30 miles of archives. It is hard to pin down what our highlights are. Our
collections expand from ancient papyrus and Babylonian tablets all the way up to digital archives. Then, throughout that, we have many rare maps and we have odd things in our collections like human brains in jars. We have the archives of a brain surgeon, and so his archives included human brains. So, the library has responsibility for taking care of those as well. We are so large in our collections that it is hard to point to one when, in fact, it is sort of the breadth of it that defines it. We have a lot of papers of famous writers, famous statesmen, and politicians in the United States—Dr. Henry Kissinger is an example. We have great collections of materials about missionaries and religion.

Would you say that in order to manage or maintain these special collections, would you sometimes need to hire special historians or archivists instead of a librarian?

Yes. We hire a lot of them. A historian would be a good example. We recently hired an archivist who also had a doctorate in American Foreign Policy, because we need this person to process the papers of Dr. Henry Kissinger. If you don’t know who the cast of characters are, you can’t work with that collection. Now, we are hiring a number of digital preservation managers. So, now with all of this digital content that’s a part of our collection, for example, if we get the collections of a modern writer, she might not bring us paper, but her hard drive and say, “This is my archive.” Now, we are responsible for the preservation of the content that is on that hard drive.

For very large collections like the Kissinger collection, which will be studied for a long time—that would be a permanent position. But, we might bring someone in to deal with a collection about plastic surgery, and that would be a temporary position. We had to find an archivist who understands medicine to come in and spend 2 years processing that collection, but then, they will move on to another job.

Yale versus Harvard, Princeton, or other Ivy League universities—are the users’ expectations, needs, and attitudes toward the university libraries and services different?

Not really. At least from the three listed, we work very closely together. There is a lot of collaboration, and the reason why we work so closely together is that we share some of the common challenges. For example, we are all expected to be what is called “libraries of record.” We are expected that when we purchase a book, we will never toss it. You can always count on us to have that book. What happens is that much smaller libraries that don’t have storage and have to throw away
parts of their collection to make room for new books. We don’t do that—what we are doing is storing those books even if we don’t see any use for them immediately, because we know that libraries across the country are expecting us to do so. We work a lot together to figure out how we balance those kinds of responsibilities that we have at a national and international level as well as also meet the needs of our users.

_Could you describe the staffing structure of the Yale University library?_

We have an IT team, which is about 25 staff members. We have a group called Technical Services, and they focus on acquiring the material, paying for it, and licensing contents. So, anything about how you get your collections, and that’s about 85 people right there. On our Special Collections staff, that’s close to 200 people. Then, we have security staff because our buildings have rare materials in them, so we need a security staff that is guarding the collections and the people. Then, we have a very large number of staff that are focused on their expertise in particular disciplines, and it is their job to decide what type of collections we should purchase to support that discipline and then work with the faculty and students to teach them how to make the best use of our collections. Every discipline on campus is represented by a librarian who often has a Master’s or a doctorate in that field.

_In terms of the security staff, do you outsource it to a company?_

No, in part, the training to know how to work with our collections takes a while, and if you outsource, you are going to get a rotation of different people. So, we would rather have a staff whom we would be able to get to know really well and they get to know us and our patrons.

Their main job is to check the bags and check to make sure that the collections you work with stay there and that they didn’t take them. We have had some pretty high-profile thefts in our collections in the past, so they are making sure that people are entering the building only through the correct doorways. They are making sure that as we’re moving rare materials from one library to another, it is being protected in that pathway. But, it is not pepper spray or handcuffs! That would be university security.

_Can you describe your typical day at work? Is there a typical day?_

The only thing that’s typical about it is that it is just meetings all day long. I am usually in seven to eight meetings per day, and a large part of my job seems to be to sit in meetings, hear what is going on, take that information, and carry it to another group to make sure that they
understand as well. I am a conduit between them. For example, I sit on the University President’s cabinet and hear what is happening at the university level, bring that information and have a meeting with my staff to say that this is going on, and how can we think about what the library can do to help support this initiative. So, my typical day is just meetings all day long.

*Can you describe your leadership and management style, your philosophy behind it, and your experiences as a leader and a manager?*

I think my style is of the philosophy that leadership is about service. So, leadership is about putting yourself out there to support and serve the organization and help that organization be successful. With that general philosophy, I am not interested in telling people how to do their job. I try to hire people who are much more knowledgeable than I am at what they are doing and rather listen to what they are trying to do, and figure out how I can get some of the barriers out of the way so that they can be successful, or how I can bring them the resources that they need to get their job done. I think it is a more hands-off leadership style in that way, but trying to focus on the importance of communication, trying to be very transparent. So, when we put together a budget for the library, we share it with the entire staff—there are no secrets about what money is being used for what. You might not agree with the decisions, but you at least see what those decisions are. The goals I submit to the University President I share with all staff members and accept their input. I try to be very transparent so that they can see why we are doing what we are doing.

*When you are hiring a new person, what kinds of qualities are you looking for in a young candidate?*

We are fortunate at Yale University that we do not have to hire just librarians. We are not required to hire somebody with just a Library Science degree. There are a lot of university libraries out there that are forced to hire only people with that degree. Actually, what we’re looking for are people with expertise in a subject area whether it is a particular discipline or their expertise in technology or data management or something like that. We feel that even though they don’t have library experience, we can orient them to what it is like to work in an academic library. We cannot take a librarian and try to train them to be a digital preservation manager or a data librarian. There is a discipline knowledge base that’s irreplaceable. So, what we are looking for is that willingness to learn and recognize that it is a really complex organization—there are
over 500 members of staff that could take years to meet everybody. There has to be a level of patience and recognizing that it is going to take a little bit longer to get things done because the communication channels and the need to bring all of the parties together just take time as there are so many of us. There has to be a bit of humility that says, “I recognize that this is a big organization and I recognize that I have a lot to learn.” I think we are also looking for individuals who share the idea that their job is a service one—their job is to serve the staff that they are working for and to focus on the successes of the staff over their own.

When you say that Yale University is a very complex organization, would you describe it as being very flat or very organic or bureaucratic?

I would say it is very much more on the bureaucratic side. There is a clear hierarchy where we have five Associate University Librarians and then it falls out underneath that. But, what we are trying to do is cut across those pieces. So, for example, we have several people working across our 15 different libraries, and we want those people who are doing similar jobs to think of themselves as colleagues and to share the best practices. We are trying to find ways to encourage that movement across the organization as opposed to just up-and-down. But, the challenge is that the libraries of Yale University are spread across 45 miles. There is a significant distance, so we cannot physically get together and have a meeting—it is impossible. There is not a big enough room and we’re spread out. It just takes a lot of time to work through strategic planning alone—it just takes many, many meetings because you are working with groups to make sure everybody’s on the same page and hears the same ideas.

In your opinion, what kinds of personality traits or attributes do most successful library directors have in common?

I think that the successful ones are those who really understand how the university works. The ones who I see are not successful get frustrated, because they feel like the university doesn’t understand the library and the university isn’t giving the library the resources it needs. I think successful library directors understand that it is their role to educate the rest of the university leadership and that they have to be the advocates out there. At the same time, they need to take the time to understand the challenges that the President, the Provost, and the Vice President are struggling with and think about how they can be a partner there. So, rather than just constantly bringing your problems to your boss and saying, “I want more money and I want to do this,” instead, say, “I see that you’re working on this particular challenge. Here is how the library might be able to help.”
So, it is to create the library as a strategic partner, and I think the directors who are able to really alter the perception of the library as not just a place for books or a museum for books, but a place of service and a strategic asset to the university are the ones who are the most successful.

What part of your job as the Yale University Librarian do you find most rewarding and most frustrating?

I think that the most rewarding part is just working with the students and seeing the students discover things in our collections, and they remind you why we built these great collections and take all of this time with it.

What can be most frustrating is when your library is dependent upon the service of others like the university. For example, while we have a large IT staff, we are dependent upon the university to provide data storage, server farms, and things like that. If they are not communicating well with us, I don’t have the power to change that. I have to spend a lot of time to create the networks with the staff and IT, and make sure that things run more smoothly in the future. It is when you can see that there is a real problem, but you don’t have the authority to change it—you just have to use your networks to try to collaborate and bring about that change.

What about the current information landscape? How is it influencing the learning, teaching, and research of the university community as a whole and also reshaping the provision of services by the Yale University library?

Clearly, the biggest change for us has been the shift from physical to digital content. If we set aside Special Collections, we spend about 70% of our budget on digital content. For us to think about how we provide that digital content in a way that makes sense to our users. If we are not careful, it just becomes dozens and dozens of silos.

The other changes for us are that we are now responsible for our research data. We have to help our researchers think about preservation and organizing of their data so that others can use it in the future. That, for us, is a brand new provision of service.

Another area for us, and in particular, the United States right now, is the idea of digital humanities. So, taking computational analysis to the traditional humanistic inquiry. That is another area of new service to us.

What about learning through mobile devices? Has it become also a trend?

We do in pockets. So, in the Medical School, they have decided that every medical student should have an iPad and that information should be delivered through it. But, we don’t see that same requirement for most of our students—for, like, Philosophy majors or something like that.
Different parts of the university have different requirements as the need for mobile devices.

_Has the changing information landscape also influenced your staff in how to design Information Literacy instructions?_

They do focus quite a bit on what we call digital literacy. So, making sure that our students know how to find quality information and how to make those judgments whether or not its quality because, on the Web, you can find anything. But, you need to be able to make that analysis. So, we spend a little more time on that than we would have 10 or 15 years ago. But, I don’t think it changes our basic instruction responsibilities of teaching our students to engage with our collections, cite them properly, and make reviews of them.

_Am I to understand that your library user education staff work closely with individual departments?_

Yes, they are partnering with the faculty. A professor will have a particular research assignment, and so we will first work with the faculty to think about what are the best resources for the students to use in order to accomplish this research assignment. It could be databases and e-journals or it could be Special Collections where they can work with archives. We help the faculty design what that research assignment will be and then make sure that we go in and instruct the students the skills they will need to do well on it.

Sometimes, they come to us way in advance and we are able to work it out in that manner. Other times, they call us the week before and saying that they’re going to bring their class in. We have classrooms within the library where we can often bring the class in. So, if we are going to teach them how to work with the Special Collections, they are going to work with an archivist because of security issues. We are more often knocking on the doors of professors saying, “Can we talk to your class?” Sometimes they open the door and sometimes they’re not interested. But, once we partner with a professor, they tend to come back year after year.

We also have some programs like the Personal Librarian program. That means that every incoming freshman is partnered with a librarian on staff. So, they have an immediate connection with a librarian, and that librarian will contact them throughout the year and ask them how their research papers are going, do they want us to come have a cup of coffee and talk about things. So, it is a human interaction until they declare their major. Once they do that, the librarian will introduce them to the librarian who is an expert in that field.
If a young person is inspired to become a librarian, what advice would you give to him or her?

I would encourage him or her to really consider the technology aspects of libraries because I think that is where most of the job growth is going to be. So, data management and digital preservation are two hot areas where we can’t seem to find enough librarians in those fields. I would also suggest that they don’t necessarily have to go to library school. The entry into libraries can happen by being, for example, in digital preservation, you can enter into that field through criminal forensics because there is a lot of commonalities in how you do criminal forensics and you work with a computer to see what crimes were done when using that computer. It is actually the same technology you used to be able to look at a writer’s laptop and not change it in any way while, at the same time, analyzing it. Some people are interested in a career in libraries, but then, once they realize that they need to go to library school, it becomes less attractive to them. I really don’t think that’s necessary. I think that library schools are too narrow in that, in the future, we will need more and more people coming into this from other disciplines rather than create this funnel that says, “You must come through the library school.”

In your opinion, what is the future of academic librarianship?

At the senior management level, I think one of the trends that is happening now is when the librarian actually has other roles. So, it is not uncommon for university presses in the United States to report to the University Librarian. It is not uncommon now for museums and libraries to start working together. Actually, there seems to be a growth amongst the portfolio of responsibilities for librarians that is actually quite fun.

What are some of the advantages of the academic or university presses to report to the University Librarian?

Well, I think part of it is, as it is with museums, common infrastructure. So, you have university presses in the end of digital file and they need to put that file someplace. But, I think that there are opportunities also to collaborate. Academic presses are trying to figure out that not everything they get can be turned into a published book. But, they want to help get dissertations published. There might be ways in which the library can serve as another publishing channel for the university press.
Dr. Susan Gibbons, University Librarian and Deputy Provost for Collections and Scholarly Communication, Yale University.

Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University.
Beinecke Library, Yale University.

Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University.
Entrance Hall of the Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University.