

EDITORIAL

From the ICU to Academia: A conversation with Maribeth Slebodnik

Ellysa Stern Cahoy and Maribeth Slebodnik

portal: Libraries and the Academy caps off our celebration of the journal's 25th anniversary through oral history interviews with long-standing Editorial Board members and past Editors. In this final 25th anniversary editorial, Editor Ellysa Stern Cahoy interviews Maribeth Slebodnik, Full Librarian and College of Nursing Liaison at the University of Arizona and longstanding *portal* Editorial Board member.

Introduction

Ellysa:

Through her research and service, Maribeth Slebodnik has been a continuous contributor and leader in academic librarianship. Maribeth and I first met over a decade ago, serving together on the ACRL Student Learning and Information Literacy Committee. In my initial collaborations with Maribeth, I remember being struck by her sharp analytical skills, her kindness and empathy, and her wonderful sense of humor. Soon after, Maribeth and I both joined the *portal* Editorial Board and worked together as fellow feature editors and as co-editors of the 2021 *portal* special issue on academic library responses to the pandemic. We have a shared interest in evidence synthesis and systematic review strategies and, in addition to co-authoring a 2022 editorial on this topic, Maribeth recently contributed new guidelines for *portal* submissions that employ evidence synthesis methodologies. This guidance is now available within the author guidelines on the journal's website.

In spring 2025, Maribeth and I met via Zoom to discuss her work as a *portal* reviewer and feature editor, her personal trajectory as a researcher, and her exciting plans for her upcoming retirement. She is a shining colleague, a natural and engaging teacher, and a stellar collaborator. Thank you, Maribeth, for your many contributions to *portal's* Editorial Board throughout the past decade!



Interview

Ellysa:

Tell us about your career and how you got into academic librarianship:

Maribeth:

My career has been very focused on health science librarianship. I was an Intensive Care Unit nurse for about a dozen years, and I got to a point where I thought, you know, I really love doing this, but I don't want to do it for the rest of my life. I was a work study student in the libraries as an undergraduate, and I always thought I wanted to get back to that. So, at a certain point in my nursing career, I went back to graduate school at Indiana University to become a librarian while working as a nurse to support myself.

When I graduated from library school, I worked in corporate libraries for about twelve years. I worked for a corporation in Saint Louis, Missouri, called Mallinckrodt Medical. They made contrast media for radiology procedures and were involved in research and development of products, like ventilator tubing and tracheostomies. It was really cool to work in the business side of health care. The second corporate space I worked in was a nonprofit called the Donald Danforth Plant Science Center, in St. Louis, which did plant science research, specifically to develop methods and plants to help with the food crisis. They worked a lot with cassava, which is a tropical plant. We had these amazing greenhouses. I'm an enthusiastic gardener, so it was fun to be in that environment, too, with all these plant people.

Then, I went into the academic library world. I took my first academic library job at Indiana State University and then I moved to Purdue University, working as a liaison to the nursing program, as well as the programs in food sciences, nutrition, and biological sciences. After about a decade at Purdue, I went to the University of Arizona, where I recently had my ten-year work anniversary. I am currently a full librarian, and I liaise with the College of Nursing. That's my primary group of patrons, and I'm based in the Health Sciences Library. This is the first time I've been in a library that's associated with a medical school. That's where the cool girls go—to health sciences librarianship!

Ellysa:

What were your first experiences as an academic author, and how did you grow and develop as an academic author throughout your career?

Maribeth:

While I was working as a nurse, I went to graduate school to get a master's in nursing, which I ended up not finishing. However, I took a research class, which was fascinating, and our project as a class was to write chapters for a nursing textbook with our instructor, Ann Marriner Tomey. I wrote a chapter with two other nurses on Florence Nightingale—the title of the book was *Nursing Theorists and their Work*, and it is still in print. There's a new edition coming out! The 11th edition will be released this year, which is amazing to me. That was my very first experience writing for publication, and I had a blast doing it. After that, I didn't write anything for publication for twenty years.

I published a few articles in *Issues in Science and Technology Librarianship* before I went to Purdue. At Purdue it's really expected that faculty librarians publish, and that lit a fire under me. I had several colleagues who very kindly collaborated with me. They were co-workers who were older and wiser than me, who invited me to do things, and I just started writing. Once I got into the habit of writing, I just kept going. You get research ideas from other people, reading papers and thinking, wait a minute—what about this piece that you didn't talk about? Then you take that idea, do some research, and write about your own perspective on that issue or problem!

I'm a few years from retirement, so I have slowed down in terms of doing library-related writing. But I still work! A big part of my job is working with students and faculty in the College of Nursing who write systematic reviews. I publish at least a couple of those each year. So, I still have a pretty active publication record in terms of writing for the nursing audience.

And then, of course, being a member of the *portal* editorial board gave me all kinds of ideas and different perspectives, in terms of writing and learning a lot about how people write and how you can help people make their writing better. That really taught me so much. An author may have a good idea, but they just haven't quite captured it, and as a reviewer, I can ask them to write more about it, or ask them questions that they haven't yet answered, that could round out what they're discussing.

Ellysa:

How did your earlier experiences as an author inform your approach to reviewing?

Maribeth:

Well, I think, like most of us, I've had the experience of submitting an article and having it sent back or rejected, and you have no idea why—you get nothing. It's just 'no.' That's so disheartening to have no idea what to do next, or how to make things better. That informs why I think it's so important, as a reviewer, to put yourself in the place of that person who maybe has never published anything before, or maybe only published in a state-level journal or a regional journal. It's important to respect that experience that they're having and to try to make it a good experience. People sometimes leave academic librarianship because they don't want to write, and I can't help wondering how many of them leave because somebody's thumped him on the head at the wrong moment, and they're just like, "I can't do this." Trying to make the peer review process a good experience, and trying to be very gentle but constructive, I think, is really what I strive for when I'm giving feedback to prospective authors.

Ellysa:

Tell us about your journey to joining *portal* and your overarching philosophies, not just as a reviewer, but as a board member as well.

Maribeth:

I worked with (current *portal* Past Editor) Marianne Ryan at Purdue. She was my associate dean, and we worked well together—we were friends. We had a lot of respect

for each other, and then we both went to separate institutions, and she was on the cusp of taking over the Editor position at *portal* and asked me to join as an Editorial Board member, and, to be honest, I had never thought about that! I had never put out feelers to try and join an editorial board. Just the fact of being asked was kind of mind blowing for me. I don't know why, because I like to write, and I like to read journals, so it seemed like I should have been thinking about that. But you know, sometimes I miss the obvious. Anyway, she invited me, and she said part of the reason was that I have this health and biological sciences background. There weren't any people on the board who had that expertise. It's always helpful to have content experts. That was why she invited me in the beginning, and I've been a board member for almost ten years now. I was a board member for three or four years before she asked me to consider being the *portal* feature editor for Worth Noting.

I have to say, my whole path has not been very intentional. It's more like, "That sounds like fun. I'll do that!" That's how I got to be on the *portal* Editorial Board. That was really eye-opening again, because Marianne was taking the reins as Editor, and it was fascinating to watch that transition. It was exciting to think about how she might like to change things as the incoming Editor. I think part of the fascination for me has been watching Marianne grow into the role and make the changes that made a lot of difference to the journal, and to see her identify you as the next editor and how she handled that transitional period as well.

I'm more of a detail person than a big picture person, and it's fun to watch people with a different perspective, and how they operate. Seeing how Marianne has navigated change—as a big picture person—has been interesting, and mind blowing, and educational, all at the same time.

Ellysa:

Your opportunities came to you because you said yes, even though it was something that you hadn't been thinking about, and a lot of people don't say yes. They get overwhelmed, or frightened, or anxious, and they say no. But you said yes!

Maribeth:

When I was a kid, I would never have said yes. When I was in college, I would never have said yes. It took being a nurse, and, it sounds blunt, but overseeing people's lives and thinking, "If I don't do it, nobody's going to do it. I better say, yes, I better be paying attention. I can't just drift along, and I need to say yes when the opportunities present themselves."

Ellysa:

I am always saying to people I work with (regarding making tough decisions), "This is not brain surgery." But in your case, it kind of was! Once you're out of that environment that really grounds everything for you like, "Why not try this?" Right?

**Maribeth:**

Exactly, and that's what I've said to people many times. "Why wouldn't we do this? No one's going to die." No one's going to die if we don't use the Oxford comma, or whatever the thing under question is. I think I have a higher threshold for stress. I've seen what it looks like when people die. As a result, I have a different view of what we're doing in academic libraries. Not that I don't take it seriously, but I just have a different perspective.

Ellysa:

What were your overarching philosophies as a reviewer and an Editorial Board member?

Maribeth:

I try to remember what it's like to be a new writer. Many people have lots of experience, but there are many people who are either new to academic librarianship, or maybe new to publishing in a journal that's in English. There are so many kinds of novel experiences, and I try to remember what that's like. I've probably turned in some not-well-polished articles. That's what we're here for—to help people make things better, right?

As far as being a Board member, the Board has evolved into a much more collaborative group, and I think there's more kindness now. I think in terms of trying to make sure that I'm pulling my weight as a Board member and not just showing up, including volunteering for committees and doing stuff that needs to be done. This is hard for me, because I'm a procrastinator. Trying to get things in on time sometimes is a challenge. But understanding again, that deadlines wait for no one. You really need to pay attention, and the faster a review is returned, the sooner somebody knows what their next step is, and that again takes some stress away.

Another thing that I think Marianne Ryan did was when she took over as *portal* Editor—she amped up our response time. I think we've continued to do that, which is so important—to be responsive to the authors and do it with kindness. I think the whole online system has helped streamline that and make it easier to be fast with editorial responses.

Ellysa:

What do you think is special and unique about *portal* as a publication?

Maribeth:

I appreciate two big things that I think have really been emphasized over and over again through my ten years on the Board. One is that we're mentoring people and new authors. I try to empathize with new authors and give them some gentle cues. Mentoring is so important, and librarianship is such a hard field to get published in, because there are so many people that need and want to publish. There aren't thousands of library journals. It's a small universe and helping people get their feet underneath them in that realm is important and I think we do it very well. I also appreciate that we don't ever just say no

to an author. Even within the context of an article rejection, we always give constructive feedback. I think that authors understand, and they get suggestions of other journals they could try. There's a lot of positive mentoring that goes on in *portal's* editorial process.

One thing that I think Marianne Ryan really brought forward in a more constructive way than I've seen in any of the other little universes I float around in, in librarianship, is the diversity of the Editorial Board. When I started, I was the first practicing health sciences person, as far as I know, to ever be on the Board. Marianne was intentional about getting people with different areas of specialization as reviewers. Now we have a really broad Editorial Board with lots of different perspectives and areas of expertise. I think that brings a lot to the journal, because I know when you're trying to think [of] who would be the right person to review an article, you have to be prepared for everything. Having that breadth is a strength of *portal*. When we joined, the Board was primarily made up of library administrators, but now we have practitioners on the Board. It's great to have people in administration. There's nothing wrong with that. Having that be the majority of the viewpoints, I think, is not a strength. I think the practitioners bring a lot, and it has really changed things.

Our Board feels like a mini cross-section of all of these cool people I could call on if needed. Whatever I need, I can usually find someone on the Board who has that expertise. It's a neat little network to be part of, because it is people from large universities to small schools. Having that diversity of viewpoints and experience is very valuable.

Ellysa:

What are three of your proudest accomplishments related to being involved with *portal*?

Maribeth:

Co-editing the *portal* special issue on the pandemic—*Academic Libraries: Responsive in Crisis*—that was a high point. It was great to see Marianne come up with that idea, and then we took it and ran with it. We were a good team! I'm so proud of that special issue. There were some interesting conversations along the way, and I think we got some terrific articles for that issue. It was an outstanding experience for me.

Another one: This is not something I did—I think it was really Marianne. It felt like the feature editors were little silos, and she helped turn it into a much more collaborative relationship. She is so good at fostering collaborative teams.

And third, several of my colleagues at Arizona—Robyn Huff-Eibl and Travis Teetor—did amazing work during the pandemic to identify the need for and provide digital hotspots for Arizona students in remote areas. They shared that with the rest of the [University of Arizona] Libraries, and I thought it would make a great Worth Noting article. They wrote it up, and I was really honored to help them edit and publish it in *portal* in 2023.

Ellysa:

When you think about your time in librarianship, were there any broad challenges, or thorny issues that you addressed or navigated?

**Maribeth:**

I left corporate libraries because I didn't like that environment. The whole time I've been in academic libraries, they've been moving more in that direction, and it's painful to watch. It's higher education in general—it's not just academic libraries. What's happening right now with the Federal Government with regard to diversity, equity, and inclusion—it is just appalling to see where we are now versus where we were even five years ago. I've been trying to show up at some of the protests. I want to get more involved at that level.

Health sciences libraries have their own set of challenges, because they're so grant dependent, and the health sciences in general are very, very grant dependent in the research realm. That's a challenge that I think we're having to meet head on. The National Library of Medicine is endangered right now, along with PubMed, and I do worry about that a lot. We are so PubMed focused. I can't imagine what would happen if that went away. Who could ever have predicted this reality? Never in my wildest dreams did I worry about the National Library of Medicine being funded. It's a scary time. However, you know, in a crisis, good things can happen because something getting swept away means there's room for other things to grow. There's always that possibility too.

Ellysa:

If you were to think back on your own publishing trajectory and your time with *portal*, what do you see happening in the academic journal publishing landscape?

Maribeth:

How are journals going to survive if there are no grants funding research? I don't think library science journals are so dependent on that, but they do publish funded research. I just don't know what's going to happen, particularly in the health sciences.

Ellysa:

If you were going to give a piece of advice to an aspiring author, what would you say?

Maribeth:

One is: write the article you would like to read and ask people for advice. I think it's really a good idea to shop things around before you submit it—find somebody who's can be your mentor. If it's somebody who publishes, you can ask them to read your drafts and give you advice. I think that's super helpful, especially if you haven't negotiated the whole publishing process previously—having somebody to provide feedback and guidance throughout the submission process.

I do like that whole ethos of "write something you would like to read." I think that's where you come up with something interesting and hopefully unique and valuable—by going down that path.

Be brave and persistent. Set your expectations at an achievable level, and get yourself published in a few places, because that will help you climb the ladder.



Ellysa:

What advice would you give to anybody who is hoping to serve on an editorial board?

Maribeth:

If you haven't thought about doing it, do so because it will be valuable. You'll learn so much. You'll meet so many great people. It's a fantastic way to hone your own writing and mentoring skills. And of course, I'm very biased towards the *portal* Board, but I feel like it's such a great experience, as a writer, as an editor, as a human being, as a librarian, to be on an editorial board. I feel like it's the one time when my primary identity is as a researcher. I'm a librarian all of the time, helping researchers. But, I'm a researcher, too! Being in that role as an Editorial Board member and reviewer helps you help other researchers, too.

Ellysa:

As you move toward retirement, what are some things that you're working on that bring a smile to your face?

Maribeth:

I just had a sabbatical! My sabbatical project was writing an open educational resource textbook for nursing graduate students who want to do systematic reviews. The title is *Conducting Scholarly Literature Reviews in Nursing*. I'm teaching the course that it was written for this semester. We're piloting the book, and I'm going through and revising it. It will go out for peer review to both nursing faculty and librarians this summer, and then I'll publish it broadly for anybody to use or adapt for their own work. I'm super excited about that, because I don't think there's anything out there that's quite like it. There are some similar titles for purchase, but I really wanted to write it as an OER work at a higher level, so that it gave readers an overview, and referred them out to things that teach them to do specific skills more effectively. It's a unique book. I'm excited to be able to share it with others.

When I'm retired, I'm thinking particularly about where I want to put my volunteer time. I'm the secretary of my neighborhood association board, and we're talking about starting a community garden. That's right up my alley! I'm going to a workshop this weekend on how to start and administer a community garden.

Ellysa:

Is there anything else that we didn't talk about that you wanted to share today?

Maribeth:

In closing, I'm so grateful to Marianne and to *portal* for my experience on the *portal* Editorial Board. It's been really important to me. I feel so fortunate to have worked with both Marianne and you as *portal* editors, and I think it's so exciting that we're celebrating *portal's* 25th anniversary!



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