

## EDITORIAL

# *portal* at 25: Exploring Steven Bell's legacy

Ellysa Stern Cahoy and Steven Bell

*portal: Libraries and the Academy* continues the celebration of the journal's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary through oral history interviews with long-standing Editorial Board members and past Editors. In this editorial, Editor Ellysa Stern Cahoy interviews Steven Bell, Associate University Librarian for Learning and Research Services at Temple University and former Editorial Board member and Social Media Editor. Steven shares his perspectives on *portal's* history, library publishing, and more.

### Introduction

If you're an academic librarian, chances are good that you know Steven Bell's name! Active in our profession since the late 1970s, Steven has been at the forefront of exploring and documenting many developments in academic librarianship, including blended librarianship, open education, design thinking, user experience and much more. His expansive publication list shares provocative and thought-provoking titles: "The Infodiet: How Libraries Can Offer an Appetizing Alternative to Google," "Is there a Future for the Reference Desk? A Point-Counterpoint Discussion," "Students Tweet the Darndest Things about your Library--and Why you Need to Listen," "A Passion for Academic Librarianship: Find It, Keep It, Sustain It--A Reflective Inquiry," and "Stop Having Fun and Start Being Quiet: Noise Management in an Academic Library." As an author, he's written for a wide range of publications and currently contributes to the *Charleston Hub* blog.

I interviewed Steven over Zoom in August 2024 to discuss his legacy as a librarian and as a *portal* Editorial Board member. In the interview below, Steven details his many contributions to the profession and the Board. As he said during the conversation, he likes to "challenge himself by taking a position on something and sharing his opinion." This courageous willingness to put himself out there has led to Steven's status as one of the primary voices in our field, as well as a documenter (and questioner and explainer)

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of major trends in academic librarianship. Following are Steven's shared thoughts during our conversation on his career and his work with portal as a reviewer, author, and social media editor.

### **Background and Beginnings as an Academic Librarian**

Steven:

I've been working continuously as a professional librarian since 1978. I've worked with so many incredible people, and I've had great colleagues along the way, both in the places that I've worked as well as in associations and on editorial boards and committees. I actually started out not as an academic librarian, but as a special librarian.

The first academic library I worked in was at the University of Pennsylvania—the Lippincott Library, which serves the Wharton School of Business. As a business library, in some ways it was a special library within an academic library. There was a strong culture of publishing and authoring at the Lippincott Library. Both our director, our assistant director, and several other librarians were all active authors publishing primarily in trade literature-type publications—the literature of business librarianship. They didn't really publish quite as much in what we would consider the more traditional academic library scholarly journals. But for me, moving into that culture did give me the impetus to want to publish and to do what I saw my colleagues doing. I eventually became a manager at the library, and then assistant director. I also earned my doctoral degree in education during that time.

I completed my doctorate in May 1996, and a job opened for a library director at a smaller private institution in the Philadelphia area (the Philadelphia College of Textiles and Sciences at that time and then Philadelphia University) and I was fortunate to get that job. It was a great opportunity for a first-time library director position. In the mid-1990s, this was the time that the World Wide Web and learning management systems were just starting. All kinds of new technologies were emerging, and it was great to have the opportunity to implement new online learning tools at the library and for the university.

In 2006, I came to Temple University in my current role as Associate University Librarian, and along the way, I became an active published author in different realms, some research-based, some opinion-based.

*Tell us about your first experiences as an academic author.*

My first accepted article for a library journal was in 1984. I published an article in a now defunct publication called *Special Libraries*. At the time, that was the premier journal for special librarianship, and it was awesome, like—“Wow! I can do this!”

Most of the things I initially published were about library technology and specialized resources. Being in a business library, you would typically write about Dialog searching or SEC documents. Working on my doctorate was also a good opportunity to do more writing. It really does help to be in a culture of publication and authoring where you have peers that can help you and mentor you.

Around 1997, I felt like I wanted to really challenge myself a little bit more. I thought I would like to write things that are more opinionated, where I'm not just talking about

technology, a resource, or research findings. I'm saying, here's what I think about something, here's why I think that, and I'm going to try to change your mind or get you to think differently about something. As a result of that, I did publish a few opinion pieces, and I transitioned into a different type of publishing. I began writing articles for *American Libraries*, and I wrote about many topics. A parable that characterizes me as an author is the fox and the hedgehog—the fox does many things. The hedgehog does one thing but does it really well. I am like a fox rather than a hedgehog. I like writing about lots of different things, and I may not be an expert in all those things, but I would like to explore something and write about it. It's always been important to me to keep pushing myself to explore new areas of librarianship or non-library knowledge that I wanted to integrate into my practice—that's how we learn and advance our skills. Wanting to write about many different topics forced me to learn about them before I could share what I learned with readers.

Around 2002, I began blogging. My first blog was *The Kept Up Academic Librarian*. My blog was about building awareness of broader issues in higher education. Then, ACRL approached me and asked if I would start a blog for them, and that was *ACRLLog*. That began in 2005 and is still going. I enlisted Barbara Fister as an *ACRLLog* contributor. Most of the writing was either by Barbara or me. Scott Walter was another original contributor. You'd be surprised at how many academic librarians I invited to blog, most who were experienced article authors, who were unable to write in our shorter *ACRLLog* blog format.

If you are a blog author, and you're writing posts that are opinionated like I did, some people will like what you write. Some people will hate what you write. That helped me to develop thicker skin. It's okay that I can write something provocative or with attitude. My overarching goal with my writing and presenting—rule number one—was never be boring. If I could get librarians to think differently, even if we disagreed or they had a personal dislike for me, that was a fine outcome. I wanted to challenge them with my blog posts, columns and articles.

In 2009, I was approached by *Library Journal* to write a column, "From the Bell Tower." I wrote this for ten years, and when I first started, I did a column every week. The focus of my column was higher education and academic librarianship and the intersection between the two. I would typically write about higher education issues and how they affected academic libraries, as well as what people in higher education needed to know about academic librarianship. I also wrote in other publishing outlets, like the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed*. Then I started writing a leadership column for *Library Journal*. I've continued to write opinion pieces from time to time, and I continue to publish in journals like *portal* and *College and Research Libraries News*, as well as the *Charleston Hub* blog.

During this period, I was regularly presenting at regional and national library conferences. There's always been a strong connection between presenting and writing for me. They feed each other. Presenting is a great way to put your ideas out to the audience for feedback, and more than a few got turned into articles. When asked about where my article and blog post ideas came from, I always encourage those asking to take their ideas out to librarians as presentations to fuel their writing.



*What was your initial work as a portal Editorial Board member?*

When I started on the *portal* board, I felt like I was working with some of the most prominent academic librarians of the time. I think what's unique and exciting about *portal*, going back to its roots, is that it was a revolutionary journal. The Board had a well-articulated mission of editors serving as mentors to help aspiring authors get published.

Their mission was about acceptance over rejection and encouraging librarians to publish. I was excited about that because I wanted to help librarians get published too. My philosophy as a reviewer and Board member grew from that time—I'm not trying to reject authors—I'm trying to help them get published. If I couldn't help them with *portal*, I would try to guide them toward other journals. Many of my reviews would say, "This isn't quite right for *portal*, but here are three journals where it might fit." I also tried to give constructive advice, like encouraging people to write in an active voice rather than a passive one and to be brief. It gets back to the most basic advice in Strunk's *Elements of Style*: omit needless words.<sup>1</sup> Such simple advice, yet so hard for authors to follow.

*You've been one of our longest-standing board members. Have you noticed changes in the journal over time, particularly with that shift from mentorship to being a more professional journal?*

Yes. Another thing we tried to do with *portal*, compared to more traditional journals, was to get people published more quickly. Rather than having them wait a year to find out if their article was accepted and another year to see it published, we wanted a faster process. That also shaped my approach as a reviewer—I aimed to get to work on manuscripts quickly, provide clear feedback, and return my reviews within two weeks. When I first joined, we were focused on that mission. The conversations I recall were about how we could become more efficient as a board and resolve divided reviews more effectively. Your predecessor (Past Editor Marianne Ryan) did a lot of work to help improve our processes, and we've continued to refine them over the years. For example, we recently moved to an electronic submission system.

I've noticed a significant change in the people coming onto the Board and the journal itself. There's more of a focus now on literature as a form of social activism. We've had discussions about how *portal* can be a vehicle for improving diversity, equity, and inclusion in our field. We've also focused on issues like data and privacy. Another change is the push to make the journal more global. We're seeing many more articles being published from regions like Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. I'm glad that *portal* is reflecting this and that we're receiving submissions on diverse topics. It's rewarding to know that academic librarians regard *portal* as a journal they want to submit to, and that we're seen as a publication that takes important social issues seriously.

*Looking back, what would you say are your three most proud accomplishments as a long-standing editorial board member?*

I've always been proud of the fact that I was able to get published in *portal* as an author myself. I'm also proud of the level of detail I put into my reviews. I went over them with a fine-toothed comb. People probably looked at my reviews and thought, "Oh my gosh, how am I going to get through all these comments?" But when they did, I believe they felt it resulted in a much-improved manuscript.

I'm also proud of the work I did with *portal's* social media presence, including starting that effort. I'd been on the board for about two years, probably around 2009. At that time, Twitter (now X) and Facebook were the main social media platforms. We didn't have LinkedIn or other platforms yet. It took a few years for the board to warm up to the idea of having a social media presence. Eventually, they said, "Okay, let's give it a try." I transitioned from being a regular board member to focusing on social media around 2015. I'm proud that we got our social media effort up and running. We started tweeting about new articles in *portal* and sharing stats and information, like our article review turnaround times. We also began conducting video interviews with authors, which I thought was a great addition. It gave authors a chance to talk about their work, and we could share that with the audience.

*Looking ahead, what do you see happening in academic journal publishing, especially regarding open access, open education, and social justice?*

One thing I see, which is both good and challenging, is the proliferation of journals. It's become easier to start a journal. There are now publishing platforms that make it—I won't say easy—but you don't need to have an association or a publisher to support you. We've seen a growth in niche journals as well.

As times change, we might see library journals come and go. I think there will always be a place for traditional scholarly journals in our field because many academic librarians are still on the tenure track. These journals, with their high-profile reputations, will continue to be important for academic librarians seeking tenure.

For other academic librarians, particularly those not on the tenure track or who have already achieved tenure, there will be more freedom to publish in specialized journals. I also think we'll continue to see a growth in global publishing, with more international contributions from Asia, Africa, South America, and Eastern Europe, which will help sustain these journals.

If someone new to the library field came to me and said they want to write and contribute, I'd recommend that they think differently and veer away from the perennially popular topics. Try to be unique. We have a lot of writing on big themes, like information literacy or scholarly communications, but I would encourage them to find a unique angle or perspective. They should ask themselves; can I take a different approach to some of these traditional topics? If they can accomplish this, it will give them a better chance of getting published.

The other advice I'd give to someone who wants to write is something I've written about in my columns: Don't start by writing. Start by presenting. If you have an idea or you've done some research, try to get it accepted as a presentation at a conference, even if it's local or regional. You don't have to start with the ACRL Conference. Be persistent. If your article or presentation isn't accepted, it's natural to be disappointed, but don't give up. There might be another journal or conference to try, or maybe you need to rethink your work. Ask for help. There are many librarians who will be glad to give advice.

*What advice would you give to those hoping to serve as reviewers or serve on an editorial board?*

Be prepared to work hard. You may have to work nights or weekends. We talk a lot about work-life balance in our profession, and that's important. But if you take on the



responsibility of reviewing, there will be deadlines, and you might have to work outside of regular hours. Some librarians are fortunate to have time set aside for scholarship, but many of us have had to make sacrifices with our time to do that. It's extremely rewarding. You're making a huge contribution to the profession, helping someone else advance their career, and potentially influencing the future of our scholarship.

*Are you working on any writing projects yourself?*

Yes, I'm always working on projects here at Temple University Libraries. One of my main projects for the coming year is launching a Zero Textbook Cost (ZTC) initiative with several of our academic programs and starting course markings in our registration system. Not many R1 institutions have started ZTC programs yet. I'm also involved in our statewide open education resource initiative, Affordable Learning PA, where we're exploring ways to fund our operations. As always, I'm trying to come up with new ideas for articles and presentations. Just recently I presented a session at Library 2.0: Libraries 2035 and did the closing keynote talk for the AMIGOS Virtual Conference. In addition to the *Charleston Hub*, I'm doing some writing for *LIBTECH Insights*. I've been at this a long time, but I still feel like I have something useful to share.

The lesson and message are that there will be ups and downs throughout an academic career, but there will always be new opportunities and ideas to get excited about. Those are the things that will sustain you over the course of your career. For me, my time on the *portal* Board is indeed among my most memorable career achievements. I'll always appreciate the relationships I made with fellow Board members, and having the opportunity to contribute to the library professional literature, enabling colleagues to make an impact with their research and writing.

Be different. Pursue your own path. I mentioned earlier that fewer people are sharing their ideas and opinions, especially if they're provocative or controversial, owing to the fear of being canceled or criticized. That's how you make progress, though. You never know which of your controversial or provocative ideas will catch on and become a movement. So, keep trying.

I'm glad I had the opportunity to share some of my past experiences with *portal* for this 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary editorial. It's been one of the highlights of my long career -- to be involved with *portal* for so many years!

#### **Note from Ellysa Stern Cahoy, Editor:**

As *portal*'s Editor, I am thankful to Steven for many reasons. First, he has served as an inspiring and educational guide for me and so many others over the years, continuously publishing accessible and interesting works on technical topics. Second, he is a kind, thoughtful, and tremendously diligent colleague. He is the very best of our profession—continuously a librarian, an educator, and an advocate in his unflagging enthusiasm, selflessness, and generosity. I'm grateful to have worked alongside Steven on the *portal* Board. Thank you, Steven, for all that you contributed to *portal* throughout your seventeen years of service!





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## Notes

1. William Strunk, "III. Elementary Principles of Composition, 13. Omit Needless Words," in *The Elements of Style* (Project Gutenberg, 2011) [https://www.gutenberg.org/files/37134/37134-h/37134-h.htm#Rule\\_13](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/37134/37134-h/37134-h.htm#Rule_13).

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