

Fall 2007

# ChangeMasters All: A Series on Librarians Who Steered a Clear Course toward the Twenty-First Century: An Interview with Howard F. McGinn

Darren L. Sweeper

Montclair State University, [sweeperd@montclair.edu](mailto:sweeperd@montclair.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/spraguelib-facpubs>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

---

## MSU Digital Commons Citation

Sweeper, Darren L., "ChangeMasters All: A Series on Librarians Who Steered a Clear Course toward the Twenty-First Century: An Interview with Howard F. McGinn" (2007). *Sprague Library Scholarship and Creative Works*. 13.  
<https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/spraguelib-facpubs/13>

## Published Citation

Sweeper, D. (2007). ChangeMasters All: A Series on Librarians Who Steered a Clear Course toward the Twenty-First Century: An Interview with Howard F. McGinn. *Library Leadership & Management*, 21(4), 165-168.

# ChangeMasters All: A Series on Librarians Who Steered a Clear Course toward the Twenty-First Century

## An Interview with Howard F. McGinn

Darren Sweeper

As with many of the library administrators profiled in this exclusive *LA&M* series, Howard McGinn's career was shaped by the civil rights movement of the 1960s. However, unlike many of his generation, McGinn was able to combine a profound religious sensibility with business acumen to forge an amazing career. When he came to library management he had more than fifteen years of corporate management experience. McGinn brought a fresh perspective to the profession, emphasizing a commitment to community service and social justice.

Born September 14, 1943, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, McGinn is the eldest of seven children. His father came from a coal mining family in eastern Pennsylvania, and his mother from a family of steel workers in Johnstown, Pennsylvania. During World War II, McGinn's father left the mines to fight on the battlefields of Europe. After the war he returned to his family and, with help from the G.I. Bill, entered college as many returning veterans did. Eventually obtaining his master's, and later his doctorate, in education, he started a new career as a high school librarian. A few years later, the elder McGinn became the chair of the Department of Education at Duquesne University. In 1958 he moved his family to Philadelphia, where he became the chair of the Library Science Department at Villanova University during Howard's junior year of high school.

The younger McGinn grew up a devout Catholic, and as a child he dreamed of a life in the priesthood. From the very beginning, he was inspired by a call to service. After high school, McGinn enrolled at Villanova University, saying today that "I entered Villanova as an Augustinian seminarian, a member of the order of Saint Augustine. I remember very clearly one day I was offered a Naval ROTC scholarship and also given the opportunity to join the seminary." After considering his options, he decided that the best way to serve society was to enter the seminary. He recalled thinking at the time about his decision to enter the Augustinian order. "After spending a year living in upstate New York, I went through Villanova as an Augustinian brother, a monk; in those days I was training to be a priest, so I studied philosophy. I graduated high school at sixteen and entered the order at seventeen."



Howard F. McGinn

In the late 1960s, when McGinn graduated from Villanova University, America was suffering through one of the most tumultuous periods in its history. The civil rights movement was raging, the antiwar movement was gaining momentum, and by the end of the decade the nation would be mourning the deaths of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy. Like the nation, McGinn found himself at a crossroads.

With the entire society in upheaval and his undergraduate program now completed, McGinn sought his own direction in life. His dream of becoming a priest had dissipated, but the urge to serve still remained. He had more pressing issues to concern himself with; now that he had left the order, he needed to find a job.

He remembers that time vividly: "I did not want to become a librarian when I left the order in the 1960s. It was the civil rights era and the antiwar movement over Vietnam was just beginning. During this time the seminary lost many seminarians, and I was one of them. I left the order with ten dollars in my pocket and a train ticket to Philadelphia. The only clothing I had was a black suit. Soon afterwards, I got a job indexing periodicals for the *Catholic Periodical and Literature Index*. At that time I needed a job, so I decided to become a librarian. During those days the state of Pennsylvania had two recruiters, one at the University of Pittsburgh and one at Drexel University in Philadelphia. . . . A man named Donald Hunt recruited me into library school at Drexel." McGinn started library school in the fall of 1967; he would graduate in 1970.

While attending library school during the evening, he continued to work as an indexer for the first year, and by the second year he took a position at the St. Charles Seminary. He recalls, "I worked my way through library school in

---

**Darren Sweeper** (sweeperda@shu.edu) is Government Documents Librarian at Seton Hall University Library, South Orange, New Jersey.

the Ryan Memorial Library at the St. Charles Seminary in Philadelphia. This was a huge theology and philosophy library with an enormously fantastic archive.” When he completed his library science degree, he was offered a job as the assistant director of the library and archives at St. Charles. McGinn quips, “I was the beneficiary of a past and strange thing in library science that said all men, no matter how young they are, will become library directors.” After spending two years at St. Charles, he was offered a job as the director of Chestnut Hill College Library in Philadelphia, where he stayed for two-and-a-half years.

But he was still seeking direction. Reflecting on his frame of mind during that time, McGinn remarked, “By then I had become thoroughly disenchanted with librarianship. I did not like it. I decided to leave the profession for a year and take some time off because I was still searching to find my true calling. So, I left, got a job teaching high school in Wilmington, Delaware, and I discovered I did not like teaching either. One day a friend who thought I would be good at sales suggested that I talk with the J. B. Lippincott Publishing Company, since he felt I had the personality to be successful in a sales position. So, I went down to interview and got the job. I became a salesman in their division of higher education.”

This move continued the process of his search for a personal understanding. “In retrospect, it was not the library profession that was difficult; it was me. I was still trying to figure out what I wanted to do in life. My whole process of doing this was delayed because I spent six years in a monastery.”

During his tenure at Lippincott, McGinn established his skills. As supervisor of the national audiovisual sales force, he coordinated the marketing program, directed sales by telephone and at national conventions, and supervised the customer service and clerical staffs in his section of the company. All of these experiences would pay huge dividends in the future. While at Lippincott, McGinn also learned the ins and outs of corporate management. During his time there, he increased the department’s sales and profits, turning the customer service department into a vital asset.

At Lippincott, McGinn had found his niche. “I sold products to nursing and medical schools throughout the United States and Canada. I eventually became sales manager of that group. Lippincott was very good to me; I was there for about six or seven years.” He used his innate ability to inspire people, learned how to manage a large staff, and became adept at getting all parts of an organization to move in the same direction. Lippincott was to be a proving ground where he learned the most important lessons about management—in order to be a good manager, the people who work with you must trust you; they must believe that you have their best interest at heart; and they must buy into your vision of organizational success and professional growth. McGinn would always remember those lessons and tried to develop them in his career as a manager progressed.

After two promotions in six years, McGinn again felt the need for change. In 1978, he left Lippincott and was hired as a managing editor of the *New York Times* subsidiary, Microfilming Corporation of America, in Sanford, North Carolina. He recalls that time fondly: “I answered an advertisement for a job in *Publishers Weekly*. The Times Company was looking for a salesman with a library science background and I was probably the only person in the world with that kind of background, and I became managing editor of the Microfilming Corporation.”

At the *New York Times*, McGinn was called on to do what would become the norm in his career in library management. By this time he had been promoted to general manager of the subsidiary, he was given the functionally complicated and emotionally difficult task of cutting seventy-five positions while keeping the company moving forward. The Microfilming Corporation of America was part of a group from which the *New York Times* wanted to divest. McGinn had to deal with serious organizational and structural issues. “I had to solve serious employee morale issues,” he understates today. His duties at *New York Times* consisted of maintaining and completing all the works in progress before the company was to close down this subsidiary. “I think most difficult thing I ever had to do was close down the *New York Times* subsidiary.”

Meanwhile, while half the staff was being laid off, he still had to move forward with reorganizing the existing staff, as the company sold its remaining assets. McGinn handled this arduous job while trying to preserve a positive and productive employee work environment in order to ensure effective closedown. McGinn oversaw the sale of the company’s assets, which included “all contracts, furniture and publishing equipment, while adhering to the constraints of federal anti-trust laws.” Among his many achievements at the *New York Times* was the completion of company’s shutdown two months ahead of schedule, saving the company \$200,000. He also helped the company to achieve sales of \$1.5 million during the final year of operation. McGinn not only led the Microfilming Corporation through strenuous times, he also continued his formal education by obtaining a master’s degree in business administration at Campbell University in Buies Creek, North Carolina, at this time.

During his tenure at the subsidiary he oversaw the editing and publishing of papers by such American luminaries as Jane Addams, W. E. B. Dubois, Horatio Gates, Norman Thomas, and Edward R. Murrow. This massive project also included the publishing and editing of the *Columbia University Oral History Program Transcripts and Index*, the papers of the *Congress of Racial Equality*, *Index Iconologicus*, *National Resources Planning Board Reports and Records 1872–1956*, the *National Woman’s Party Papers 1913–1974*, and the *Socialist Collections in the Tamiment Library 1972–1956*.

After a fifteen-year hiatus from librarianship, McGinn had learned several valuable lessons that would serve him

later, when he decided to reenter the library profession. From his corporate years he learned the value and importance of diversity. He discovered how to manage under demanding and difficult circumstances, and how competent management could lead an organization through challenging times. Armed with a solid practical and theoretical management philosophy, he applied for a position with the State Library of North Carolina and was hired, embarking on another phase of his career in management.

In 1985, McGinn became the director of network development at the State Library of North Carolina. While serving in this position, he created the first statewide electronic information network in the United States. Revolutionary for its time, the network made available commercial and governmental data to all areas of the state. McGinn also developed and implemented library information services for small business development in rural and urban areas around the state. He worked tirelessly with OCLC for the construction and development of the North Carolina Online Union Catalog and the Online Union List of Serials. Both state databases began operations in summer 1986.

After a year of great success, McGinn was promoted to the position of assistant state librarian. Working in collaboration with the University of North Carolina Educational Computing Services, he helped to develop a statewide telecommunications network. He also worked with AT&T to develop an electronic information delivery system to distribute state government data programs. This information system created the first state government information Web page. McGinn's work not only benefited state library patrons, but also had an enormous effect on the way business transactions were conducted in North Carolina. He concluded his work on the state information network by working with the North Carolina Department of Administration to develop an online state government jobs database.

In 1989, he was appointed the North Carolina state librarian. He was now responsible for managing a staff of 111 full-time employees, including 24 professional librarians, and annual budget of \$15 million. McGinn was responsible for managing a complicated organization that included several departments, among which were the North Carolina information network, automated systems, state government information services, marketing, the library for the blind and physically disabled, statewide library development and film services, and the genealogy library. These varied duties had to be performed while working within the constraints of a bureaucratic state system.

However, his tasks were complicated by the social environment of the time. McGinn met these challenges while working in a state that was just beginning to confront the racial issues of its past. North Carolina, as with many other southern states, was undergoing profound social change even while the old vestiges of Jim Crow still persisted in the south. McGinn's philosophy caused friction between himself and a number of the professional librarians and library staff, who took issue with his hiring of African-Americans (includ-

ing an African-American assistant state librarian) and other minorities in the positions that were traditionally occupied by whites. His experience in corporate America and his strong personal contempt for racial prejudice made the decision to buck the old system easy for him. Old traditions die hard, though, and those who opposed him stepped up their efforts to have him removed from his position.

In 1992, after two years of racial harassment, character assassination, threats of physical violence, and the deepening of the rift between himself and the staff, McGinn decided to leave North Carolina and take a position as the public library director in Emporia, Kansas. From 1992 to 1995, McGinn worked diligently to provide services to the community. He negotiated a contract with the local technical college to create a network between the college and the public library in which college courses would be offered at the library. McGinn created the "Rites of Passage" and the "La Raza" programs for African-American and Mexican-American young people. The program was named one of the fifty best library programs for young people by the American Library Association in 1994. Working with the city commission, he appointed the first African American to the library board in its 125 year history. He also worked hard to restore staff morale after the previous administration had left him with a difficult work environment. He had to gain the confidence of and support of both the staff and community. He worked to pass an ordinance to establish a capital improvement fund. After three years, the library's budget had increased by 24 percent, while the library's hourly operation increased by 25 percent.

At the Emporia Public Library, McGinn saw the power of people at work. He reveled in the experience of working within a diverse community, and, along with his staff, was committed to providing the best possible services to all. He also took the initiative to further his own education by enrolling in the doctoral program at Emporia State University. His dissertation focused on the experiences of African-American librarians from across the country who had been the victims of workplace harassment. McGinn's dissertation, "An Investigation into Factors that Influence Job Satisfaction of African-American Librarians in Some Urban Public Library Systems in the United States," completed in 2003, gave further evidence that the field of librarianship still needed to confront long-standing racial and social issues. For him it was a moral imperative to continue the struggle against social injustice. After three years in Kansas, he decided once again to fight the war on a new front. This time he took a job in Portland, Oregon.

After having the opportunity to lead a public library, McGinn decided to return to an academic setting. In 1995, he accepted a position at the Portland (Ore.) State University as the executive director of portals. Building upon his experience at the state library of North Carolina, McGinn redesigned and reconstructed the telecommunications network infrastructure of portals. He was responsible for administering an electronic information network that

served more than a dozen academic institutions throughout Oregon, Multnomah County Public Library, and the Oregon Historical Society. Once again, McGinn was able to work closely with state and local officials to serve the library community of the state. McGinn managed a \$4 million federal grant that was used to design an interactive video instructional network and scan historical maps, photos, and other important state-related manuscripts; he also helped to establish a mobile Internet access van that provided online services to patrons throughout the state. He led an initiative for an electronic publishing program on the Web that was vital in expanding access to this information network.

After two fruitful years in Portland, McGinn took on a new challenge, returning to a public library setting in New Haven, Connecticut, where he assumed the position of city librarian in 1997. Among his first goals in New Haven was to reestablish a positive relationship between the library staff and administration. For years, many unpleasant issues had caused a serious rift. "Gaining the confidence of a staff is hard," he acknowledges; but during his tenure at New Haven Free Public Library the task proved to be even more difficult because of a racially and professionally divisive environment. "The African-American employees were placed in one department, where they were not allowed to talk with the white employees." Dismayed by the way that librarians treated other librarians and staff members, McGinn set out to change this culture of racial and professional segregation.

His first order of business was to make the library a single entity once again by tearing down the old barriers. He worked hard to bring the staff together in order to serve the community. McGinn did this by starting a marketing campaign aimed at bringing patrons back into the library. With the help of his staff, he started an ethnic heritage series and obtained a \$12,000 federal grant for a year-long celebration of the city's Hispanic culture. He initiated similar programs that reached out to New Haven's Italian and Jewish communities. McGinn hired a public information officer to promote library programs and distribute information about upcoming events to the greater New Haven community.

McGinn created programs to serve the African-American and Latino communities by building book collections for them and establishing such programs as poetry night and chess clubs. Working closely with the local public access radio and television stations, he established programs to keep the community apprised of events and news about the library. McGinn started a marketing partnership with many city departments and agencies aimed at increasing the visibility of the library as well as fostering positive relationships with local state and private organizations. In the space of eighteen months he recruited and hired nine African-American librarians (there had been just one in the previous twenty years). However, he did not stop with a simple marketing campaign. Working in collaboration with Yale University and the New Haven Public Schools, McGinn established a community technology center in a neighborhood branch. The center taught basic computer applica-

tions classes, helped patrons with résumé writing and job searching, and provided an intergenerational program for local retirees and children.

To gain support for these projects, McGinn visited the neighborhoods and attended the local churches of all denominations, because "library directors need to get out of their offices and into the communities, they need to find out who their constituents are and listen to their concerns." McGinn strongly believes in active participation on the part of library directors and that they should be visible and deeply involved in the communities they serve. Directors can only lead an organization if they have their finger on the pulse of the neighborhoods.

In 2000, after nearly three successful years at the New Haven Public Library, McGinn returned to academic libraries. This time, McGinn accepted a position as the dean of university libraries at the Clarion University of Pennsylvania. From the outset, McGinn met the challenges of the new position. Through his efforts, a \$15 million facility was built. The new building also housed the University Art Gallery, the Graduate Department of Library Science, and a state-of-the-art technology center with 137 computer workstations. He created a smart classroom and a fully operational and wireless campus environment. McGinn was appointed by the university provost to work with the university director of the Small Business Development Center and the chair of the biology department to establish a private biotechnology incubator. He led an aggressive sales and marketing program to bring faculty and students into the new library. Under his stewardship, the library went from being a book graveyard to the most active place on the campus. As at his previous positions, McGinn helped to restore the morale and confidence of the library faculty and staff. He worked with the faculty union to foster and improve unproductive working relationships and he mentored scores of African-American, Hispanic, and international students.

In June 2004, McGinn decided to leave Clarion University and accept a position at Seton Hall University in South Orange, New Jersey, where he is currently dean of the university libraries. In closing our interview, he wanted to impress upon me the importance of good management and how the lack of sound management and diversity are the most pressing issues confronting librarianship in the twenty-first century. McGinn argues that we in the library profession need to do a better job of training managers. The very survival of profession depends on the quality of managers that lead our organizations in these times of tremendous change.

McGinn tells his story without a hint of bitterness or regret, despite some challenging confrontations. He looks back fondly at his career and the remarkable things he has accomplished, the many lives he has touched, and those that have consequently touched him. From working with state and local officials, community groups, churches, civil organizations, library associations, college administrators, and faculty, he has forged a ChangeMaster career to be emulated.