

APUS Online Libraries: A Virtual Globally Dispersed Twenty-First Century Academic Library System

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Apus Online Libraries Main Portal, 2012

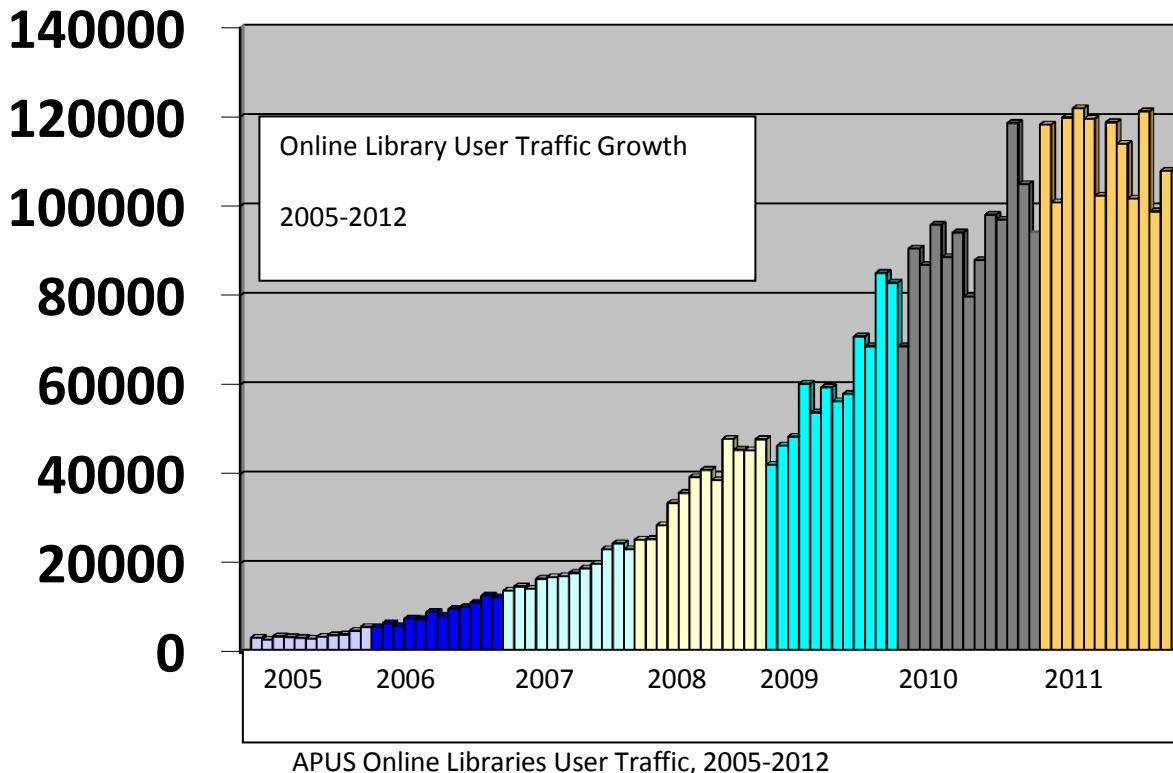
Online Libraries in a Virtual Environment

While many people tend to think of librarians as working in a physical place where they interact face-to-face with patrons and their library colleagues, the Internet and other advanced communication technologies have changed this traditional paradigm (Duncan, 2008; Schneider, 2000). The ability to provide library services using a remote staff has become a reality at American Public University System where librarians all work in a virtual work environment. This means they choose their own location to

perform their work duties whether this be a coffee shop, home office or the beach. Online Librarians can also set a majority of their own working hours, allowing for much flexibility in work schedules with the exceptions of virtual reference desk shifts and when attendance at a teleconference is needed.

American Public University System began as American Military University offering graduate-level courses in Military Studies in January 1993 with a total enrollment of 18 students. No ivy-covered walls were in evidence; nor were there any large classrooms. Instead, there was a small office in Manassas Park, Virginia. The first graduation was in 1996 with Allard G. Wagemaker from the Netherlands as the first graduate. Growth has continued logarithmically to 2012 where annual enrollment figures now top 120,000 registrations! The soundness of a fully online university was demonstrated by this dramatic growth with the institution which now possesses seven schools, over 80 undergraduate and graduate degrees and 69 certificate programs all regionally and nationally accredited. There are now also two institutions under the umbrella American Public University System (APUS): The American Public University (APU) and The American Military University (AMU). APUS is now also a relatively new paradigm for universities, a NASDAQ traded corporation (APEI) taken public by the current President, Dr. Wallace Boston in 2007.

The university also now employs over 1800 geographically dispersed largely Global Faculty but also large online professional library staff including currently 20 geographically dispersed online librarians in North American and the Middle East (See Appendix 1). The 2012 graduation awarded 986 Associate degrees, 3163 Bachelor's and 2947 Master's with 29 countries represented – from Algeria to Zimbabwe, Canada, Germany, Iraq, Netherlands, Nigeria, U.S. Virgin Islands, United Kingdom, and the United States with the graduation ceremony taking place at National Harbor in Washington D.C. and students, faculty and deans all flying in for the traditional pomp and circumstance.



Multiple factors work together to make APUS's unique virtual library work environment a new model for academic libraries in the twenty first century. The University provides each librarian with a laptop computer, intranet access and rights to the institutional Content Management System. Librarians all have access to the online library and the University classroom learning management system, Sakai. Springshare products, CampusGuides and LibAnswers, are cloud based, allowing for virtual group collaboration.

Technically, the American Public University System Library is an academic library supporting faculty, staff and students in an online, asynchronous, for-profit educational setting. The library's collection consists of licensed e-resources, supporting various programs offered by the university. The library offers 150,000 licensed e-books from 9 different vendors, 42 online full text, aggregators, multi-media streaming video databases, and over 35,000 full-text journals with a full suite of information discovery applications including Aquabrowser, Serials Solutions 360 Journal search and A-G Graphics

Online book catalog. Accompanying, the virtual large e-book collection, the library also possesses physical collection of 3000 military-related books and burgeoning archival collection focusing on the universities specialty of security related studies and accepting donations from various personages associated with the US Service. Notably, the archives house former Army Inspector General Richard Greenleaf Trefry's complete archives.



APUS Online Library, Online Students and Geographically Dispersed Librarians

The library's presence is both globally virtual with accompanying physical base in Charles Town but also primarily 'technically in the 'cloud' with catalog, information discovery tools journal aggregator, databases, course guides all served from geographically disparate US and globally based server locations. The primary way APUS's globally dispersed student body access and envision the library is through the libraries virtual online web presence and online gateways available through the universities learning management system (Sakai). The library website, currently sits behind the instructional fire-wall and institutional gateway at <https://www.apu.apus.edu/login/student/index.htm> available to all students and faculty through a foregrounded link in the online classrooms. As the digital infrastructure of an online university is largely web pages, library use is uncharacteristically high as the university consists of essentially the online 'classroom' and the online library as main curricular/online learning

components. The website makes available all traditional library services, virtually including both an online tutorial center and various traditional library functions completely migrated to virtual arenas.

APUS Online Library Tutorial Center

The smaller physical library and archives in Charles town, West Virginia houses APUS's archival collection. This serves regional and national accreditation purposes, is open to the local community and is found on the ground floor of the University's newly constructed academic building.



APUS Academics (Charles Town, WV)



APUS Physical Library (Charles Town)

Staffing of the library is reflective of the nature of our library and university. There are 20 part-time librarians who work remotely, approximately 15-25 hours each week staffing the library for help approximately 18 hours/day, seven days week. Librarians act as subject specialists, program liaisons and cover the extent of virtual reference services including ILL and the online classroom basic questions or routing to appropriate university parties. All the librarians report to the on-site library director who

oversees operations, human resources and coordination with the wider online university and programmatic needs. The library director reports to the Dean of Library & Educational Materials, Library-Instructional Design who oversees the library, electronic course materials (the bookstore) and e-press. This heterodox allocation and synthesis of traditional separate university divisions allows for synergies and collaborations otherwise not possible in a more traditional environment including making good use of the library resources as direct curriculum replacement both a cost saving measure and return of the academic library to historical foundations. The current potential for library, university e-press and e-textbook synergies is enormous (See Uzwyshyn, 2012).

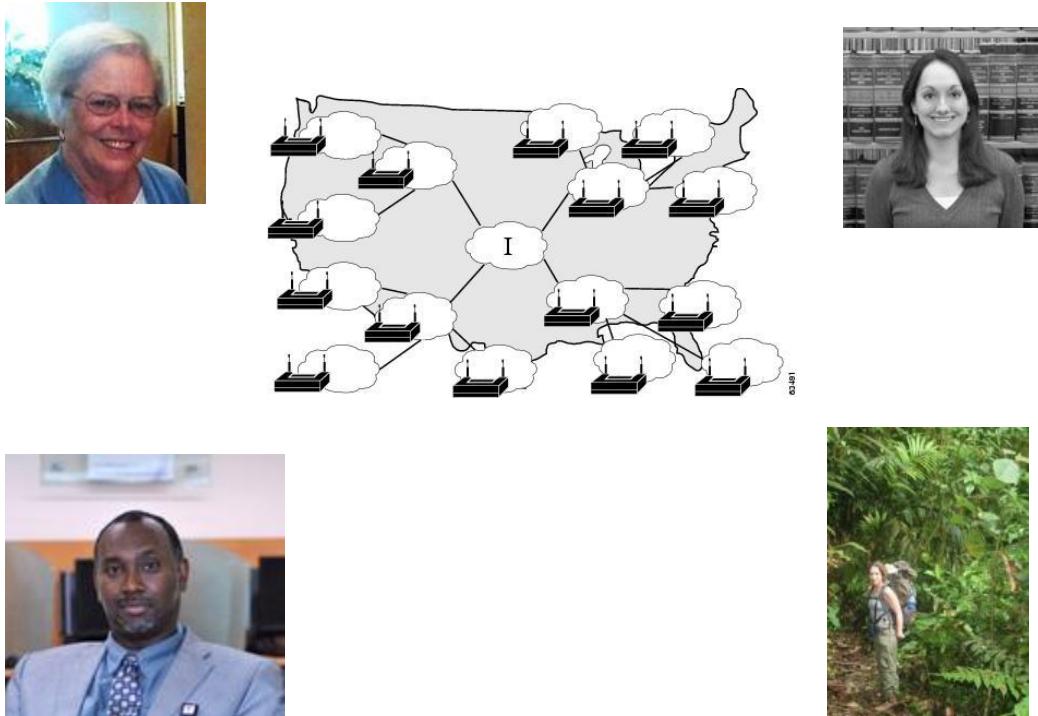


APUS E-Press/Library/Electronic Course Materials, Savings and Synergies

APUS Online Librarian Duties

The part-time, online librarians share responsibility for virtual reference desk services and a host of other duties. To accomplish virtual reference duties to a globally diverse student and faculty body, geographically dispersed librarians are scheduled with overlapping emails. One librarian later in a shift is able to see earlier traffic. This provides wider synergies and coverage for APUS faculty, staff and students. When scheduled for the virtual desk, the librarians are responsible for covering several library

service points including email, a Semantic Q&A knowledge database (LibAnswers) with the option of question submissions and an array of social media including Facebook, and Twitter.



Geographically Dispersed Librarians in an Online Environment: Pictured Here from Top Left Clockwise: Susan Hyland (Florida and Virginia), Jeannette Moyer (Pennsylvania), Mustafa Abdelwahid (Abu Dhabi), Priscilla Coulter (Texas)

Another shared responsibility consists of program liaison duties. Like more traditional university libraries this includes advisement on collection development issues, advanced research assistance for graduate students and a foregrounded role for accreditation reviews which is taken very seriously in a for profit environment. The liaison duties include the creation of virtual pathfinders and direct course curriculum textbook replacement, using Springshare's CampusGuides product, at the course and program levels. Creating guides is a key component of each part-time librarian's responsibilities and the guides have become a cornerstone in the universities innovative online multimedia curricular replacement focus .

In addition to these shared duties, the online part-time librarians have additional individualized responsibilities, depending on the needs of the library and the various skill sets of the librarian.

Specialized cybrarians become the defacto point of contact for the various library applications which reside in the cloud (online catalog, course guides, semantic reference engine etc). Virtually, librarian subject specialists in tandem with library administration also offer school, program and faculty education workshops through Adobe Connect and Faculty online meeting forums. The system is geographically dispersed, global and operates efficiently through various Web 2.0 methodologies native to the online internet environment.

APUS Online Course Guides: Counter Terrorism Studies

Focusing on Help in an Online Environment

Taking advantage of the library team's distribution across multiple time zones, librarian subject specialists are able to offer prompt assistance in shifting time spans. Springshare's semantic reference engine LibAnswers is utilized to answer student-submitted questions, as well as to build a searchable public knowledgebase of frequently-asked research questions. As of June 2012, APUS current installation of the Libanswers public knowledgebase featured well over 90,000 views. Libanswers has

also become the primary automated resource for students wishing instant technical answers with regards to the universities online classroom and online learning management system, Sakai.

LibAnswers: APUS Semantic Reference Engine and Main KnowledgeBase for the LMS, Sakai

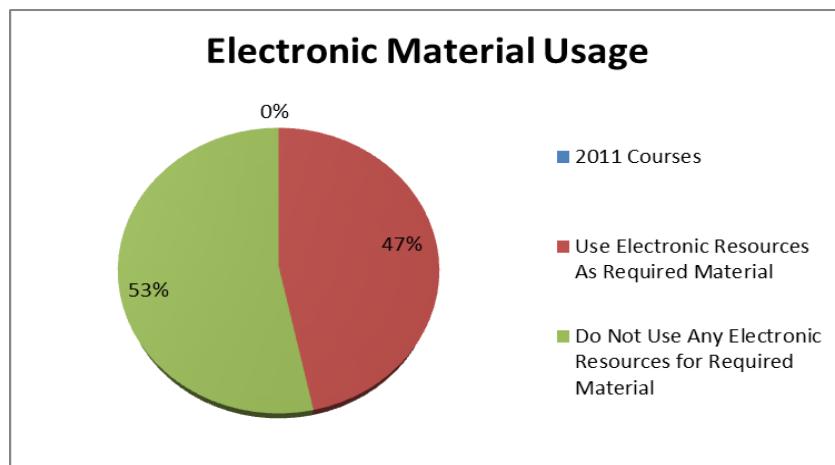
The libraries also broadcast LibAnswers' Q&As via social networking sites and embed them inside the university's classrooms and in library course guides. To this extent, APUS libraries has created accounts with several social networking sites, including Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and Google+. While student questions submitted at these sites are not particularly common, they provide a vehicle for broadcasting research tips, answers to common questions, and library news. The steady growth of "followers" on each site indicates that our users appreciate our presence on the social web. The opportunity to reach large numbers of students at once is invaluable.

Online Help and Reference Duties: Questions and Needs in a Globally Dispersed Online Environment

APUS librarians answer several hundred general reference questions each month. High enrollment courses with research assignments from a large adult learner population generate much of

the traffic. For instance, COLL100 (Foundations of Online Learning), is a course required of all APUS students; in 2011, just under 39,500 students took the course. To help with the flood of student questions that arrive as these assignments nears, the librarians established a COLL100 set of topics in LibAnswers semantic reference engine. Each of the commonly-asked questions is represented, with research tips intended to give students a solid start on their class assignment, as well as information literacy instruction that serves the students well in later courses. As the library's website traffic consistently indicates that students are doing their research during the evening and non-traditional hours, this automated source of help is an important part of reference service.

In addition to the expected questions related to classroom research assignments, APUS online librarians encounter a wider variety of “non-research” questions than do many of their brick-and-mortar colleagues. For example, the libraries field a large number of textbook and course materials queries (e.g., “Where is my textbook located? I can’t find it in my classroom!” or “My course e-book won’t open. Help!”). Technology related troubleshooting questions are common as well (1,605 in 2011). To answer these successfully, it is imperative that librarians maintain a close working relationship with the university’s electronic course materials and classroom support teams which all work closely together.



APUS Electronic Course Curriculum Materials Usage and Library Synergies.

Geographically Dispersed Faculty and Librarians



Clockwise from Left to Right, Dr. Ev Corum (Program Director, Foreign Languages), Online Librarians, Christy Stevens, Susan Sartory, Dr. Chad Patrizi (Dean, Business School).

The virtual library environment has not only untethered librarians from a physical library but also enabled the library to better manage material and human resources. One such enhancement is the use of the geographically dispersed university and the library's (GDT) virtual team's model. GDTs are made up of members who are "dispersed across distance and time and linked by electronic communication technology. (Sessa, Hansen, Prestridge, & Kossler, 1999, p. 1). APUS Libraries has been a

vanguard in the implementation of the GDT model in the library environment with members dispersed not only around the country but around the world. The GDT model has proven beneficial to the APUS Library in several ways as it provides the library with a human resources advantage, allowing the recruitment of a high level of library of subject area and technological expertise, regardless of geographic restrictions. Librarians are dispersed across the country, from Maryland, to the Midwest, to California to Abu Dhabi and complete their work for APUS from various disparate university/institutional environments.

The part-time status of most APUS librarian positions also enables the library to hire very talented librarians who have full-time jobs at various high-end academic and government institutional libraries (Appendix 1). APUS students and faculty in turn benefit from the advanced subject matter knowledge and technological expertise of librarians who would otherwise be unwilling to leave their current positions. The librarians enjoy the added compensation that accompanies a virtual part-time position in addition to the independence and innovation an online university allows. Other benefits of the GDT model include significant cost reductions. While the University pays for the librarians' laptops, it does not provide them with office space, furniture, copiers, printers, etc. The part-time model saves the University money as it does not have to provide part-time employees with full time benefits or physical infrastructure demands contributing to a green business practice.

The use of the GDT and virtual model has a variety of implications for libraries, not only shaping organizational communication and the ways the libraries accomplish 'help in the twenty first century but also influencing affective factors. Because APUS librarians and students alike are geographically dispersed around the globe, the majority of research questions are answered via email. In order to be effective, librarians must learn to translate the social cues they were able to use and read in a face-to-face environment, such as tone and facial expressions, into their emails, not only answering patrons' questions but also making them feel at ease and satisfied with the exchange. Research also suggests

that while GDTs communicate less than co-located teams, their communication is often more task-oriented (Sessa, Hansen, Prestridge, & Kossler, 1999, p. 6). However, GDTs are also characterized by less social interaction than co-located teams, which the library attempts to mitigate by supplementing email correspondence with quarterly conference calls and face-to-face retreats, where librarians may also take the time to get to know one another socially. “GDT members are less socially inhibited and less hierarchical” than members of co-located teams (Sessa, Hansen, Prestridge, & Kossler, 1999, p. 5) and less hierarchy and inhibition is a positive outcome of the GDT model, since organizations that promote innovation tend to be participatory and non-hierarchical (Ahmed, 1998, p. 36).

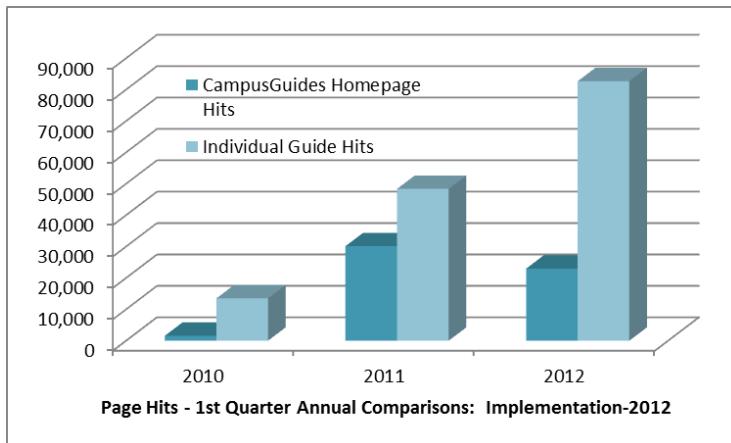
Online Course Guides as Direct Textbook Replacement

Online Course Guides Homepage: <http://apus.campusguides.com/>

For corresponding academic programs, librarians are tasked to create related online course guides. Each course guide is created in cooperation with the lead instructor for the course, guided by the course syllabus and increasingly used as a low cost multimedia curriculum replacement. The course guide itself links to licensed library resources at the article level and database level, as well as open access and multimedia content which serves the organization and students well as a major cost saving

measure. (See Stielow, 2012) Springshare Campus Guides platform allows the libraries to incorporate extensive video and web 2.0 elements into APUS course guides which fits both student preferences and the adult learner population. The platform also enables the modular use of data elements, furthering the scalability of a project of this size.

The course guides can be accessed by users through multiple points. The most important access point is from directly within the each APUS Sakai classroom and teaching faculty are encouraged to link directly to the corresponding course guide from within their virtual classrooms. A secondary point of access is from the library website and the open web through Google search.



APUS Online Course Guides Year Over Year Usage, Growth and Adoption

The course guides have become a key library resource for our faculty and students. Students use the course guides for research. Faculty use the course guides to facilitate course assignments and increasingly as a more effective textbook replacement (See Stielow and Uzwyshyn, 2011).

Online Course Guide: Wal-Mart/APUS Online MBA in Retail Management Integration Course

The Future of Academic Library Services – Online



APUS Online libraries and librarians presents a new generation and model for the academic library. Through innovative HR virtual teams, use of the cloud for the library infrastructure but also increasingly online course guide adoption as traditional text book replacement, the libraries have set a forward thinking vision of academic libraries in the 21st century. In this respect, IMS Global awarded APUS libraries its gold medal in May of 2012 for best new innovative learning technology at an international learning technology competition and subsequent awards ceremony in Toronto. In June 2012, APUS Online libraries again received an honorable mention award by the US National University

Technology Network for best new distance learning technology application for its online course guides initiative and forward thinking vision for the future possibilities and relevance of libraries in the 21st century networked environment. While APUS libraries exist in a for profit online environment, the for-profit bottom line status has allowed the libraries to move with agility, develop new academic library/university synergies and thrive on technological potential in the new millennia that would not be possible in a more traditional brick and mortar environment. As the phenomena of the online university grows from the vanguard to wider acceptance by the established academy , APUS online libraries expect to do the same.

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Appendix 1

2012 American Public University System APUS Online Librarians Professional Qualifications and Current Physical Place of Residence

- **Mustafa Abdelwahid**, Sudanese-born (Ph.D., Public Policy & Administration, Auburn); M.L.I.S., Wisconsin; B.A., MA in Political Science & International Development, UNC, L.L.M., Baku; Political Science and International Affairs Liaison. ABU DHABI & GEORGIA
- **Kimberly Adams**, M.L.S., M.A. in History, MA in Teaching English as a Second Language Reference; History & Military Studies Liaison; SerialSolution and Jane's lead. VIRGINIA
- **Cechman, Christy**, M.L.S (Valdosta), (Doctor Chiropractic), M.Sc. in Space Studies, Space Studies and Public Health Librarian. Center for Disease Control. GEORGIA & NEW MEXICO.
- **Linda Cranston**, M.S.L.S., M.A. in Geography; Criminal Justice Liaison, Cataloging Head. VIRGINIA
- **Priscilla Coulter**, M.L.S., M.S. in Biology; Math & Sciences Liaison, TEXAS
- **Susan Fingerman**, M.L.S., Former editor of *SciTech News*. RefWorks, IT, Science & Space Studies Liaison, MARYLAND
- **Maryelizabeth Gano**, MLS Catholic U., MBA Hood College; Tutor.Com chief librarian. Logistics and Hospitality Program Liaison, WEST VIRGINIA
- **Emily Harrell**, M.L.I.S. and RN from Florida State University. Former U.S. Navy Nurse. TurnItIn, IT, and Nursing Liaison, FLORIDA
- **Susan Gilroy**, M.L.S., M.Ed. in Education, M.P.A, in Business; Online Reference, Education Liaison; LexisNexis specialist. Former Head Librarian, Travis, AFB. IDAHO.
- **Neville Grow**, M.L.S., M.B.A.; Business and Legal Studies Liaison; Librarian in private law firm. CALIFORNIA
- **Susan Hyland**, M.L.S., Associate Director, Head of Reference; National Security, Intelligence Liaison; Lois Law and Ebsco Databases Lead. Former Head of NSA Libraries. VIRGINIA & FLORIDA
- **Jeanette Moyer**, M.L.I.S.; Homeland Security Liaison; Praeger Security International lead. PENNSYLVANIA
- **Carole Nowicke**, Ph.D. Library & Information Science, M.L.S.; Head of E-Books; Public Health, Sports Management Liaisons. INDIANA
- **Susan Sartory**, M.L.S. University of Maryland, Former Head Librarian McDonogh School, Online Reference, Education Liaison. MARYLAND
- **A. Marissa Smith**, M.L.S.; Charles Town Librarian, Social Science and General Studies Liaison, LibGuides Coordinator. WEST VIRGINIA
- **Christy Stevens**, M.L.S. University of Iowa, M.A. in English, UC Irvine; M.A., Women's Studies, San Diego State U. Information Literacy Coordinator/Humanities Liaison: CALIFORNIA
- **Fred Stielow** (Ph.D. History & American Studies, Indiana) M.L.S., URI; Dean of Libraries & Educational Materials. MARYLAND AND LOUISIANA
- **Raymond Uzwyshyn**, Ph.D., Media Studies, NYU, M.L.I.S. University of Western Ontario; Director of Libraries. WEST VIRGINIA
- **Tyler Veak**, Ph.D., Science & Technology, Virginia Tech., M.L.I.S., U. of South Carolina, Environmental Sciences & Philosophy liaison, VA.
- **Wendy Veney**, MLIS. Valdosta State University, Circulation and Interlibrary Loan, WEST VIRGINIA
- **Bradley Wiles**, M.A., History, M.L.I.S., U of Wisconsin, University Archivist, WEST VIRGINIA