

10 Questions: Mary Martinez-Garcia

THE REAL ESTATE MARKET MAY BE SLUMPING, BUT THE LIBRARY MANAGER AT THE LARGEST ORGANIZATION OF REAL ESTATE AGENTS IS RAISING HER PROFILE AND ADVANCING HER CAREER.

BY STUART HALES

In real estate, it's often said that the three most important factors are location, location and location. But at the National Association of Realtors (NAR), whose one million-plus members buy and sell real estate, the three most important words seem to be education, education and education.

That's the driving force behind Realtor University, a new learning institution created by the NAR to provide advanced education, professional development and continuing education in the field of real estate. Beginning next year, Realtor University will offer a master's in real estate (MRE) degree online, with classes taught by PhD-level faculty.

As with any educational institution, the success of Realtor University will depend greatly on its students, its leadership and its library. Mary Martinez-Garcia, an SLA member since 1994, is involved with all three: she manages the NAR library, was named earlier this year to the university's board of regents, and will begin taking university classes in 2012. *Information Outlook* spoke to Mary recently about joining the board and going back to school and how she thinks these developments are going to affect her work and career.

Q: You've been managing the library at the National Association of Realtors since 1997. Did you have any training or experience in real estate prior to accepting this position?

I actually did—I worked at a couple of real estate brokerage firms from the late 1980s until the mid-1990s. During that period of time, I decided that I wanted to go into the field of librarianship, so I went to school and earned my library degree in 1995.

Beyond my work in real estate, I completed an internship at the Shedd Aquarium library, which gave me library experience—until then, I had never worked in a library. Between those two work experiences, I ended up landing at job at a special library at the Appraisal Institute here in Chicago. This enabled me to gain more experience in both real estate and librarianship.

In my opinion, the job at NAR was destiny—it was a good match for me

and for the association. When I was working at the brokerage firms, I was an administrative assistant; I never worked in the area of real estate sales. But I was able to learn a lot just by assisting the sales team and, in particular, supporting a fabulous managing broker. It definitely furthered my interest in real estate, so when this position became available at the National Association of Realtors, it really piqued my interest.

Q: The National Association of Realtors is the largest trade organization in the world, with more than one million members. What's the biggest challenge you face in managing the NAR's library?

There are several challenges. Probably the biggest is acquiring good resources that meet all the needs of our members. We have quite a varied constituency—Realtors that focus predominantly on residential real estate, others that focus on commercial real estate, some in property management, others in inter-



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national real estate, some in appraisal. All of those various areas require different bodies of knowledge in our collection. We also support association staff and the staff of some 1,500 real estate boards and associations across the country. So, it's really about balance and bringing in the best resources that meet all of those needs.

Then there's getting the word out about our library and its resources. That's always been a challenge. We continually try to promote it to our one million-plus members across the country and around the globe.

Another challenge is making more resources available digitally. Our digital book collection by and large serves the needs of our members for accessing books easily, but they want more, and rightly so—we're competing against the likes of Amazon.com and Apple iBooks. Balancing that need with budget constraints is always a challenge.

Keeping ahead of technology is a challenge—we have to be ahead of the curve and be able to support the needs of our members who are out in the field. We use a "divide and conquer" strategy here at the library: we have some librarians who focus on social media, some who focus on Internet search tools and techniques, and others who focus on the newest tools for organizing information. It's all about keeping ahead of the technology curve.

Aside from all of these challenges, we have to be ready to handle just about anything here. We have seven librarians on staff, but we're housed in a department we call Information Central, and there are 17 of us total. There are seven people with library degrees, and the remainder have different backgrounds—communications, marketing, technology, and so on. We all serve as the central point of contact for our members and association staff. We have a state-of-the-art contact center, and we all spend time on the phones—we have assigned times to handle incoming calls from our members and association staff. We handle probably about 85 to 90 percent of the calls that come in to the association.

Q: The last three years have seen housing prices plummet and home sales slow significantly; prior to that, housing prices had been rising dramatically and the housing market was on fire. Did the change in fortunes in the housing market have any impact on your role or that of the library?

Absolutely. Our collection has always been very diverse, but because of the changes in the housing market, it was natural that our Realtor members would have greater needs for information about re-emerging trends and topics. For example, we already had resources about short sales and foreclosures and



Mary Martinez-Garcia in the administrative offices of Realtor Uiversity.

working with properties in distress, but when the demand for them shot up, we found that we had to fortify those areas in the collection.

We also saw, and continue to see, a shift in the focus of incoming research requests. We provide quite a bit of support for our government affairs unit and surrounding departments in the association, so we're involved in a lot of the requests that come from those areas as they work to fight potential barriers to home ownership, such as flood insurance availability, taxes and loan limits. So we're definitely much more involved with internal requests.

And we're doing more to provide

information to our Realtors, not only in the areas of foreclosures and short sales, but also in getting back to basics like marketing and sales strategies. During the housing boom, a lot of people did a lot of business rather quickly; now it's really about getting back to the fundamentals, so we're providing many more resources in the areas of business planning, marketing, and sales strategies.

Then there are budget challenges. We're having to do more with less, so we're re-thinking and eliminating some programs and offerings in the library. We do our best not to eliminate programs for our members, but we're cutting back in areas like the staff training that we offer. We used to provide more educational offerings for our internal staff, but now we've had to cut back and re-think how we're doing things and where we're spending our money and time, which are both limited.

On the flip side, other departments are requiring more from us because they're working with reduced staff and budgets. We do our best to assist other departments in their missions, so our workload has gone up in those areas.

Q: You recently were named to the board of regents of Realtor University, which provides advanced educational opportunities to NAR members. Why do you think they selected a librarian to be a regent, and what will it entail?

The library has been an important part of the university project from its very beginning. It's critical that there is a library for this program, not only to obtain operating and degree-granting authority from the Illinois Board of Higher Education, but also, down the line, to receive accreditation from the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. So the library is a key component of the university.

The library was engaged in the university planning process early on, not only for information and statistics about our library holdings for the application process, but also to look at learning management systems and to get an

idea of what the needs would be from a variety of perspectives. It made me think—wouldn't it be great if I and one of my staff could enroll in the program to learn what the students' needs are in the way of information resources? Who better than us to go through the program and experience first-hand what the students are experiencing? So it all evolved from that thought.

I took my idea to the dean of student services and the dean of academic affairs, and they brought it up to senior staff and the chairman of the board of regents. Everyone recognized that it would be a great opportunity for us to learn the needs of students and faculty and respond to them quickly, and at the same time we would acquire subject matter expertise in areas that we might not have had before. Yes, we all know quite a bit about real estate from working in the library, but we'd learn much more by going through the MRE program.

So it really was a great opportunity for all of us to benefit. And ultimately it made sense for them to have me join the board of regents as a student representative and also serve as the university librarian so that information, resources and ideas could flow freely between the library and the university.

Now, as far as what my position on the board will entail, it requires that I serve on a couple of committees in the university. I serve on the Finance and Budget Committee and on the Research Center Committee to create high-level policies that will ensure the success of the university. I also attend quarterly board meetings as a representative of my two committees, the library and, ultimately, the students.

Q: By enrolling in the program, you'll earn a master of real estate (MRE) degree. Aside from the additional knowledge, what do you expect to gain from it?

The program will start in March of 2012. The other librarian, Kate Stockert, and I will be part of the first cohort of students to go through the MRE program. We'll take 12 courses, and we're expecting to complete the program in two years.



Mary Martinez-Garcia interacts with an NAR member using Skype.

I actually had been accepted into a doctoral program in librarianship earlier this year, and it coincided with the chain of events that led me to inquire about enrolling in the MRE program. I had to think about whether I was going to pursue a PhD in librarianship or learn more about the subject matter in the field in which I work. I had to weigh which one would serve me better, in my position, in the long run.

I opted to go forward with the MRE rather than the PhD because I felt that it would serve my library and my organization better than a doctorate in librarianship. I don't know if saying that I value subject matter expertise over an advanced degree in librarianship will create ripples in the library community, but my decision was to stick with advancing my expertise in the subject matter of my library. What will the library gain, besides knowledge? Ongoing communication and relationships with the student body, faculty and university board—and, ultimately, a successful MRE program.

Q: SLA has an Association Information Services Caucus, of which you are a member, but no caucus or division that focuses directly on real estate. Do you belong to any organizations or com-

munities, either physical or virtual, of information professionals in the real estate field?

I do stay in contact with a small number of information professionals in the real estate field, more or less on an informal basis. I tend to turn to them when I have questions or if I want to bounce ideas off of someone. But I also do that internally, with our own association staff. We have folks here who have long tenures in the association and the industry, so I have access to a lot of knowledge, and I take advantage of it.

I also look to SLA for educational opportunities, and I utilize SLA listservs to keep up with what's going on in the world of librarianship. I'm also affiliated with other library associations, including ALA [the American Library Association] and ACRL [the Association of College and Research Libraries].

Q: Speaking of SLA, how did you hear about it, and when and why did you join?

I learned about SLA through Dominican University when I was a student, and I knew almost immediately that I wanted to go into a special library setting, so it made perfect sense to join SLA. I joined SLA even before I began working in a special library setting.

Q: In your experience, what's the greatest benefit of membership in SLA?

I particularly love the educational opportunities. I think the only way to stay relevant is to keep growing in the field you're in.

There's something to be said for online learning, and SLA certainly offers that, but there's a lot of value in traditional conferences, and that's where I like to put my resources. I don't get out often enough to talk to others in the field, and conferences give me the opportunity to do that.

Between the educational and conference opportunities and the connections with other members, it's easy to get what you need from SLA. What I especially like is that there are opportunities for involvement at any level. You don't have to be a member of multiple committees. There are those of us who prefer to pick and choose, and SLA offers that menu of opportunities to its members.

Q: You mentioned conferences, and SLA will be in Chicago next year for its 2012 annual conference. Given that you're in Chicago, is it safe to assume that you're planning to attend the conference?

I wish I could attend SLA conferences every year, but our budget is limited even in good years, so we try to rotate conference attendance. There are seven librarians on staff, and everyone gets an opportunity to go to an SLA conference every couple of years.

I'm very happy that the conference is taking place in Chicago in 2012, because it's quite possible that I might have to pay for it out of my own pocket. So, yes, I'll definitely be going.

Q: Considering what you've learned from your job experience and your involvement in SLA, what advice would you give to library school graduates entering the information profession today?

I have a lot to say in this area, because even though it's been awhile, I can still remember coming out of school and jumping into the field. I would say that there are four areas I'd want to address with new graduates.



To celebrate National Library Week, the NAR library hosts a bookmark-making activity. Joining Mary (seated at end of table) are, from left, Chuck Richtfort, Frederik Heller and Kerrie Bartlett Walsh.

First of all, there are valuable skill sets that people need when they enter the library field. There's no question that library skills—the research skills, the curiosity, being able to analyze information, being able to deliver information in a way that's relevant to your constituents—are critical. But in addition to those skills, communication skills are absolutely essential—everything from public speaking to writing in a way that makes sense on the Web. You can't do business without having those skills.

Technology and innovation are skills that I look for when we have openings here at NAR. I need to see a track record of innovation, because it tells me that the person can take a problem and deliver a solution that makes life easier, not only for staff but for our constituents.

Customer service skills are critical. Without customer service skills, the other skill sets almost don't matter. You have to know how to work with your constituents in a way that keeps them coming back.

And librarians need solid organizational skills—time management, being a self-starter, following through on projects, and using good judgment. Those are skills that will take you miles into your career.

Beyond these skill sets, the other advice I would offer is that subject mat-

ter counts in a special library setting. Special libraries come in different sizes, different cultures, and different flavors, but if you don't like your subject matter, your work will not be satisfying, and it will be apparent to those you serve. I have always enjoyed the field of real estate, and every day I learn something new and feel challenged. So it's important to love your subject matter.

One other thing I'd share with new graduates is to surround yourself with the best in the field. I know you can't always do that right out of the gate, but as you grow and develop your network of people outside your organization, surround yourself with the best in your field. Internally, you'll be able to spot the best in your organization. I have to say that we have some of the finest and most talented people here at NAR, and it makes my job not just easier but also more interesting.

Lastly, I would encourage new graduates to dream big. Do the impossible; go where others fear to tread. Taking on projects that others don't want or are afraid to jump into will allow you to learn more, develop more, increase your network, and make the greatest impact on your organization, your field and your career. **SLA**