

A pioneer of digital libraries: Wendy Pradt Lougee retires from her longtime legacy as University librarian

Lougee helped the library system transition into the digital era.

By NATALIE RADEMACHER



SYDNI ROSE

Wendy Pradt Lougee, University librarian and dean of libraries, poses for a portrait in Wilson Library on Wednesday, Oct. 16.

Wendy Pradt Lougee has had quite an impact at the University of Minnesota, leading one of the nation's top research library systems into the digital era.

For almost two decades, Lougee has been serving the community as the dean of libraries and University librarian. After she announced her retirement last year, the University is searching for her replacement. The finalists, who are speaking on campus over the next several weeks, have large shoes to fill.

Right place, right time

Lougee stepped into her current role during the early 2000s, a pivotal time for libraries with the transition to the internet. She helped carry the University library system into the era of technology and digitization.

During her time at the University, Lougee helped establish the University as a premier research library system. Colleagues describe her as one of the pioneers of digital libraries.



“She came at the right time to help us understand what the role of libraries in the 21st century could be,” said John Finnegan, dean of the University’s School of Public Health. “She was the right person, right talent, right place, right time.”

She helped build the libraries beyond just a collection of books and into a hub of data curation, information and resources.

Lougee said when she joined the University, she had a “road map” in mind to help the library engage more in the flow of student and faculty work. Part of this involves looking at how library buildings can serve needs better, including offering labs and tools such as virtual reality and data visualization to students and faculty.

Under Lougee’s guidance, the libraries are involved in the flow of what people are doing with information beyond simply reading books.

A visionary

Imagining the dean of libraries, it can be easy to envision the stereotypical librarian — a woman surrounded by books who shushes loud students.

This is not Lougee. She is a busy woman. Her job involves overseeing the 12 libraries on campus and an annual budget of around \$45 million. Her library system serves every corner of the University and people across the state.

John Butler, associate University librarian for data and technology, said people are often surprised when they hear about the leadership responsibilities of libraries.

“Maybe it is debunking the stereotype of librarians, but we are dealing with some pretty fore-fronting issues in terms of technology and the law, policy development and development of sustainable models for doing big collaborative work,” he said.

Despite her busy administrative role, Lougee brings a casual charm to the job.

Talking with her is like “meeting your next door neighbor,” Finnegan said. “She is filled with ideas and information and has fantastic listening skills on top of it.”

Colleagues describe Lougee as a visionary who has an appetite for change and making things happen.

“She has her eye on what is impactful, and what we should be doing that will benefit all the different colleges,” said Kate McCready, interim associate University librarian for content and collections.

Lougee’s role is unique because she serves everyone on campus and has to figure out how to accommodate their different needs, she said.

Her impact

Under Lougee’s leadership, the University’s libraries were awarded the National Medal for Museum and Library Service in 2017. This award is the nation’s highest honor for museums and libraries, and the University is the third academic library to receive the award.

“It really underscored everything she had been doing to build the strength of this library in Minnesota,” Finnegan said.

Colleagues say one of Lougee’s largest impacts at the University is bringing institutions together.

Under her leadership, the University built a project with Big Ten universities to provide access to geospatial data resources through an online portal. The University has lead several other large projects that have brought institutions together to share resources.

“She brings entities together to do big things,” Butler said. “She has led libraries to collaborate in ways we have not done before.

As the search for a new dean of libraries and university librarian is underway, colleagues said Lougee has not slowed down in her role.

Once a new person takes over the position, Lougee plans to do some writing and possibly engage in groups she was not able to be a part of while in her role. She said she may get a dog.

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