Dana Rooks led the University of Houston Libraries through nearly two decades of transformation, having first risen through the ranks of librarianship.

After holding positions at the University of Oklahoma and the University of Missouri - St. Louis, she joined the University of Houston. At UH, she fulfilled the roles of business/economics reference librarian, coordinator of library instruction, library personnel coordinator, assistant director for administration, assistant director for public services and administration, and acting director. This year, Rooks will retire after 18 years as Dean of Libraries and Elizabeth D. Rockwell Chair.

During Rooks’ career, the Libraries became a well-regarded campus institution. She is candid as she recalls that, when she first arrived in 1979, “the library was a failed organization. It had a massive uncataloged backlog which was growing each year. The library was not a service oriented organization in any respect. Technology was emerging for database searching and technical processing functions, but the library was not engaged in adopting the technology.”

Things began to improve when Robin Downes, Rooks’ predecessor, was hired as library director in 1980. True pride and admiration shines through in Rooks’ characterization of the Libraries as it exists today. “The University of Houston Libraries is accurately perceived by the students, faculty, and administration as highly successful,” she said. “The librarians and staff are dedicated to meeting the needs of all our constituents, we are innovative in the application of technology, and we focus on assessment and outcomes of all our programs and services. This transformation and positive spirit will only get stronger under new and fresh leadership as I step down from my role as dean.”

When Rooks became dean in January 1997, her first priority was to address the declining levels of funding from the state, as needs within the Libraries increased. To mitigate the effects of a shrinking budget, Rooks’ focus grew outward. “I knew before being named dean that the State of Texas could no longer provide the level of funding that universities had relied on in the past,” she said. “The library could never be more than adequate unless we could successfully attract external funding to allow us to achieve the excellence our students, faculty and community deserved.”
With little experience in development and no donors to call upon, Rooks was determined to master the art of fundraising. She launched a comprehensive development effort, which included hiring a skilled development director who coached her on strategy. She penned a column appearing in Journal of Academic Librarianship from 2006 - 2008, “Library Fundraising: Random Ramblings,” which chronicled her experiences in library development and served as part guide, part reality check to others in the field.

Some of Rooks’ many accomplishments in development include initiating and implementing the University’s first incubator endowment program, the Acorn Endowment; increasing the library endowment by $7 million; securing three endowed chairs for the Libraries, including the dean’s position; and increasing Annual Fund giving from $5,700 in 1997 to over $200,000 annually.

This series of boldy successful fundraising gains culminated in her most notable achievement: raising $20 million in less than three years for the MD Anderson Library building addition.

“The library building campaign was my most intimidating challenge,” Rooks said. She enlisted the support of University Advancement professionals, a group she sees as “invaluable allies and unwavering advocates for the Libraries.” Faculty and staff became supporters, and “remarkable volunteer leadership from the community stepped forward in the persons of Belle and Richard J. V. Johnson and Beth Robertson to lead our efforts to achieve what seemed to be an overwhelming goal.”

Through the campaign’s duration and construction phase, Rooks saw unyielding dedication from the librarians and staff. “They worked through the dust, the noise, and the wildly fluctuating temperatures,” she said. “They never complained, and they provided the highest levels of service at all times, under all conditions. The library never veered from our normal hours of operation. The librarians and staff didn’t just maintain, they moved forward with new services, new programs, and new operating efficiencies.”

Today, the MD Anderson Library is noted as a gorgeous facility that Rooks (and the community) have regarded as a jewel of the University and city, and was created through a unified team effort.

As a leader, Rooks has a distinctive combination of collaborative and decisive ability. She meets all situations with savvy aplomb, but that’s not what is most fascinating about Rooks. It is her tendency to advance herself and her team by seeking and conquering unfamiliar territory.

“I have learned that one’s most significant accomplishments are those which were not in one’s comfort zone,” she said. “Leaders challenge themselves, they challenge those around them, and they seek opportunities that are outside their comfort range.”

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Over the course of her career, Rooks has had several influential mentors. “My mother was a librarian, very prominent and nationally recognized in public libraries, so she was my first and foremost mentor,” she said. “I had the opportunity to work for some outstanding library directors and deans, and learned different things from each one. I’ve worked hard to mentor other people that I come across in my career. I always tell them they have to be more successful than me.”

It’s true that Rooks is known as a mentor to many, including her team of UH librarians. She has a simple message for this special group of “innovative, creative, dynamic individuals. ‘Keep your passion, be a leader in all you do, don’t be afraid to take a risk, and enjoy the ride.”

UH students also know Rooks as a friend and supporter in their academic and professional development. Her message to students is practical and very liberating. “Regardless of the path you choose on your future life, or your career, learn how to effectively find and use information. Information literacy skills will make lifelong learning possible.

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Whether starting and sustaining your own business, keeping current in your chosen field, moving to a new line of work, or dealing with personal issues in life, success is dependent on finding and utilizing valid information to make knowledgeable and informed decisions. Learn those skills, find a library wherever you go, and use the expertise and resources you find there.” If you stay in Houston, we, of course, welcome you to use the University of Houston Libraries.”

All libraries have the potential to empower individuals and communities, and Rooks has held to this belief as she has led numerous collaborative efforts to strengthen independent and state-supported libraries. Rooks founded and served as president of the Texas Council of Academic Libraries (TCAL), and is one of the founders of TexShare, an innovative model for statewide library resource sharing. More recently, she was a co-founder and president of the Texas Digital Library.

UH Libraries is a member of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), an organization of 125 distinguished research libraries in North America. ARL affirms the power of ARL libraries to enact positive transformation in librarianship. Again, Rooks assumed a leadership role on a national level as a member of the ARL Board of Directors.

“I strongly believe that ARL libraries have an obligation to the greater library community,” Rooks said. “In a city like Houston, we are the library that has the resources, expertise and capacity to be able to not only participate, but to take a lead in collaborative statewide, regional, and citywide efforts.”

Rooks has a simple formula for success in career and life: always be learning. “I knew in graduate school I wanted to be an ARL library dean,” she said. “You start by figuring out what you need to do, to do that, both from a credential standpoint and from what skills you need. Like all people, you learn from the good and the bad. You evolve by increasing your knowledge, being curious, doing research, using your network, anything you can find just to be better.”

Always focusing on excellence, Rooks has recruited talented librarians who are experts in various areas from across the nation to join the University of Houston, and has surrounded herself with top performers. She has relied on her associate deans, Linda Thompson, Marilyn Myers and John Lehner, as trusted and knowledgeable advisers who serve as connectors to the departments that keep the Libraries going. Her leadership team helps to communicate and execute the values, goals and culture she has shaped over time.

Sharing knowledge and resources, and inspiring others to improve, academically, professionally and personally, is at the heart of what the University of Houston Libraries is, and will continue to be. “I don’t care whether they are high school debate team students or public citizens who are doing research for a better opportunity to advance themselves, their families, or community,” Rooks said. “We have the expertise and the service attitude regardless of who the person is. Whatever the purpose, when they need that, we’re here. That’s us, that’s what we do. That’s how we win.”

Dana Rooks, leader, mentor and friend, has shown unflinching dedication and stellar leadership in her 45 years as a librarian and dean. UH Libraries donors Tom and Becky Jay have generously made a lead gift to establish an Acorn Endowment in honor of Dana’s career. This endowment will provide funds to address the University of Houston Libraries’ greatest needs.

Our goal is to have the endowment fully funded before Dana’s upcoming retirement. In addition to the Jews, more than a dozen additional donors have contributed to this fund.

For more information on contributing to the Dana Rooks Acorn Endowment, contact Todd Marrs, Director of Development at 713.743.9741 or dmarrs@uh.edu

Dana C. Rooks
Dean of Libraries and Elizabeth D. Rockwell Chair