

Living Textbook | **TAMING THE CHAOS****FINDING THE FIT IN ORGANIZING**

The pros know they have to discern where clients really want them to focus – and how to catch emotional signals.

**Second of three parts**

For most professors, summer is more about research than relaxation. It's one of the few uninterrupted stretches of time when we're not teaching or handling other school-year responsibilities.

That means we often spend June through August crunching numbers in computer labs, hunting down sources in libraries and archives or traveling to far-flung places to gather data. In my case, it meant crawling through cobwebbed attics, re-organizing a vast shoe collection, and unpacking box after box of other people's kitchenware. As I wrote



**CARRIE LANE**  
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in last week's column, I've spent the previous year studying professional organizers, who make their living helping people and businesses get and stay organized. The most exciting part of my research has been working as an unpaid assistant to organizers on a variety of jobs to learn how the organizing process works.

Many clients reach out to organizers when they feel overwhelmed by an upcoming move, overly cluttered house or approaching tax season. Other organizing jobs are born of a specific life change, such as the joining of two households, the birth of a child, or the death of a loved one. Still other jobs are a matter of maintenance – creating a system for managing incoming mail or reorganizing the closet for a new season.

**STEP BY STEP**

The first step in the organizing process is a consultation in which the client explains the problem and the organizer tries to establish the type and amount of work likely to be involved. As organizers often emphasize, there is no "best organizer." Instead, finding the right organizer is a matter of fit, both in terms of the sort of work to be done and the person who will be doing it.

Organizers are quick to refer clients to other organizers when the job doesn't seem like a good match. For instance, some organizers dislike working with paper, which takes much longer to organize than other types of belongings.

An organizer who receives a call to help sort decades of backlogged files might refer the job to another professional. If a prospective job involves hoarding, an organizer not trained to handle that level of disorganization and the sensitive issues that come along with it might pass the job to an organizer who is, perhaps offering to assist the more experienced professional in order to gain experience.

During the consultation, the organizer usually describes her or his approach to organizing and offers preliminary ideas for how the problem might be approached and how long it might take, which can be difficult to estimate up front.

Organizers also outline their rates, determined by the project or by the hour. The usual range for Southern California organizers is \$50-\$150 per hour. For cli-



NIKKI HAVENS, THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

**A professional organizer faced the challenge of this closet of Christmas decorations.**

ents, I've found that fit tends to matter more than price. Most choose someone they feel most comfortable with and confident in, rather than the one offering the lowest rate. This remains true even now, when organizing services are offered for as low as \$15 per hour on websites such as TaskRabbit, Fiverr and Craigslist.

Once on site, most organizers start by asking which area of the home or office is most in need of attention. "What hurts?" one organizer likes to ask, acknowledging the anxiety that cluttered or poorly functioning spaces tend to evoke.

Often the area that most bothers clients is not the one an observer would deem the messiest or most overcrowded. In one home, the kitchen was so full of paperwork, shopping bags and even clothing that it was hard to see how one could possibly prepare a meal or even fully open the refrigerator door. Yet to the client, the kitchen was fine. It was the home office that felt out of control to her and so that was where we focused our work.

This sensitivity to the client's perspective is one of the hallmarks of professional organizing. Being organized and being a good organizer are two different things. Being a good organizer requires working with clients who might have very different priorities and standards than the organizer herself, thus the job requires both sensitivity and a nonjudgmental approach. The finely tuned filing system an

**Editor's note**

For the past year, Cal State Fullerton professor Carrie Lane has been interviewing professional organizers in Orange County and other places across America. She's attended talks and seminars on getting organized and worked alongside organizers as a paid assistant. In this Living Textbook series, she writes about the field of professional organizing and what it can tell us about work and life in modern America. This is part two in the three-part series.

**Biography**

- Carrie Lane is an associate professor of American studies at Cal State Fullerton, where she teaches courses on work, community and American culture.
- She is author of "A Company of One: Insecurity, Independence, and the New World of White-Collar Unemployment" and winner of the 2012 Society for the Anthropology of Work Book Award.
- Although she could probably help you get your sock drawer in order, you should visit [napo.net](http://napo.net) or [challengingdisorganization.org](http://challengingdisorganization.org) if you want to find a real organizer in your area.

organizer might prefer for her own office might be far more complex than what the client needs or can keep up. Good organizing is less about applying preset organizing principles than finding a system that works for a particular client.

**FUNCTION FIRST**

The variety of forms effective organization can take is one reason many organizers dislike the "before and after" images that appear in magazines like Real Simple and Martha Stewart Living. A desk or kitchen does not have to be stylish and sparse to be effective, they say. Thus, while most organizers can achieve the look of a glossy magazine "after" if that's what the client desires, they prefer to privilege function over aesthetics.

I found this attention to clients' unique needs, both practical and emotional, to be the most interesting part of the organizing process. Whether the job involved sorting paperwork, setting up a nursery or de-cluttering a storage unit, I was consistently amazed at how intimate and emotional the organizing process can be. As one organizer told me, "It's never about the stuff."

Instead, she and others explained, it's about the meaning and emotions people attach to the things they possess. Sometimes the emotional component of the job is obvious from the start, as when an organizer is hired to help go through a deceased spouse's belongings or to organize financial papers after a divorce.

Other times the emotions behind the problem emerge over time, as when reorganizing a home office turns out to involve helping someone confront the pain of a layoff and steel themselves for the job search ahead, or when clearing out a storage unit entails processing intense feelings prompted by photographs of an ex-boyfriend.

Organizers therefore pay close attention to the client's emotional state, making sure to arrange a break, move to a different task or wrap up for the day when the client begins to seem exhausted or overwhelmed.

The emotional component of the work can prove challenging, but it's also what many organizers describe as the most satisfying aspect of their job.

Clutter, one organizer said, is "the stuff that gets in the way of you living the life that you want," and by clearing clutter and tackling other organizing challenges, organizers aim to help people live happier, more productive lives. One client called her organizer after their session to say she'd invited a neighbor for tea for the first time in 12 years, as she was no longer embarrassed to have someone in her home. Many clients describe working with an organizer as "better than therapy," and while organizers emphasize that they are not therapists, there is certainly a therapeutic component to much of the work they do.

Hiring an organizer is not a panacea for the problems of the modern world, nor is it an option everyone can afford. But for some, organizers can serve as a useful resource for managing the complicated, over-cluttered lives so many of us lead today.

**PUBLISHED****MEXAL AUTHORS READING FOR LIBERALISM**

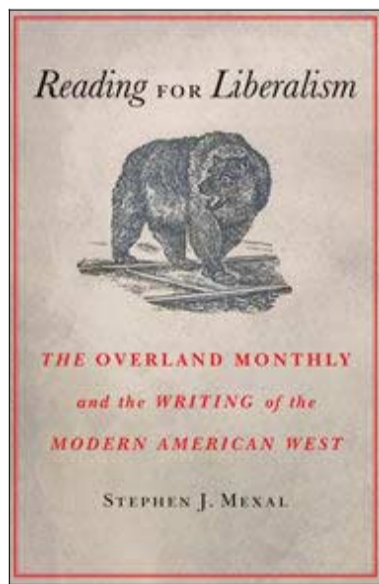
Stephen J. Mexal, associate professor of English, comparative literature and linguistics, authored the book "Reading for Liberalism: The Overland Monthly and the Writing of the Modern American West" and a chapter in "Regionalists on the Left: Radical Voices from the American West."

"Reading for Liberalism" examines literary representations of political liberalism in 19th-century California, but his interest in the connections between narrative and civics has led him to write about subjects as wide ranging as Mexican travel narratives from the 1830s to hip-hop in the 1980s, Mexal writes in his CSUF faculty profile.



GREG ANDERSEN CAL STATE FULLERTON

**Stephen J. Mexal, an associate professor, recently published the book "Reading for Liberalism" and a chapter in another book.**



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ture for children and for adults, from the 19th and early 20th centuries.

**NORTON REVIEWS BOOK ON 18TH-CENTURY NOVEL**

Brian Michael Norton, Cal State Fullerton professor of English, comparative literature and linguistics, reviewed Carol Stewart's 2010 book "The Eighteenth-Century Novel and the Secularization of Ethics" in the spring edition of The Scribberian.

"Ms. Stewart surveys the eighteenth-century novel 'as a

new arena for moral and political controversy; as a means of supporting the prevailing order or protesting against it; and as a means of gaining fame, influence and – not least – money," said Norton in his review. "The book makes for a fine introduction to the eighteenth-century novel, deserving shelf space alongside Brean Hammond and Shaun Regan's "Making the Novel: Fiction and Society in Britain, 1660–1789," and John Richetti's The English Novel in History 1700–1780."

**BRAVO****PROFESSOR RECOGNIZED FOR NEW PROGRAM**

Cal State Fullerton political science professor Shelly Arsneault received the Harry Scoville Award for Academic Excellence from the Southern California Chapter of the American Society for Public Administration.

Arsneault was recognized for her efforts in creating CSUF's City Management Fellowship Program, a year-long mentorship program that pairs public administration graduate students with Orange County city managers.

Arsneault earned her Ph.D. in political science at Michigan State University.

**GRADUATE TO WORK AT FORD'S THEATRE**

Patrick Pearson, who earned his master's degree in theater arts from CSUF in 2007, was named director of artistic programming at Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C.

Pearson's award-laden resume as a director includes "Rooms: A Rock Romance" at Chance Theatre in Anaheim; "The Trouble With Words" at

Celebration Theatre in West Hollywood; "A New Brain" at El Portal Forum in North Hollywood; and "The Diviners" at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.

He has also received two Director of the Year Awards from StageSceneLA and a Best Ensemble Award from LA Weekly.

**PROFESSOR AND STUDENTS PERFORM ABROAD**

Cal State Fullerton student cellist Kevin Mills, flutist Vincenzo Lai, pianist Nikolas del Palacio, violinist Lambert Hsieh and violist Miguel Cunanan and CSUF professor of music and cellist Bongshin Ko recently performed invitational concerts in Germany and France.

Mills won a \$2,000 prize at the Mu Phi Epsilon Instrumental Competition, first-place honors at the American String Teachers Association's Greater LA Finals and second-place honors at the International Music Competitions held in South Tyrol, Italy, earlier this year.

Ko's solo CD, released by Sony Classical in 2010, recently received recognition from the label.



Pearson



Arsneault