Back Talk-Advances in Education and Librarianship

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Robert Maynard Hutchins is to have said, "Every advance in education is made over the dead bodies of 10,000 resisting professors." I wonder if the same could be said of librarians? On the surface of things, it would seem that nothing less than the complete opposite is true. We have reorganized ourselves, we are electrified, we are lean and sometimes mean. But have we changed?

At Columbia I work in the Butler Library, a building that has been meeting the needs of faculty and students for the past 50 years or so. If we think of a generation of students taking four years, more or less, 10 to 12 generations of new, expectant bright young minds have gone in and out of the Butler Library over the course of these 50 years. What do today's librarians do differently now than they did 50 years ago?

We still select books, buy them from publishers and booksellers, put numbers on them, shelve them, and answer questions about which ones are best for our student and faculty use. Yes, we, unlike our predecessors, use computers to select, order, number, and help students and faculty find the best item to fill the need, but functionally, not much has changed. Maybe nothing should change. Universities are funny places. Structurally they change gradually. But the contents they serve up, especially in the sciences and even the social sciences, have changed radically during this same 50 years. Perhaps librarians are the same. Outwardly they change little, but the contents of the books and journals belie what is going on inside the uniform blue, red, and black bindings. I guess in this way we parallel our host institutions.

This isn't to say that American higher education hasn't changed. In this century many of our English-patterned colleges became universities and we saw the end to the study of Greek and Latin; the end to apprenticeships for the professions and the teaching of medicine, law and business; fantastic increases in the numbers and varieties of courses taught; the growth of vocational training for every occupation imaginable; a boom and then a bust of traditional-aged students; the influx of older, returned students; the emergence of the research university the mega-university; and the growth of specialization in research and majors touching faculty and students alike. Over the past 50 years we went from perhaps 2 million students to more than 20 million post-secondary education students. And now we contemplate and enact distance learning to reach even more people.

With all this growth, how have we changed? The answer, of course, is tied to the question of whether we are. At Columbia the conflict between the humanities and the sciences for library resources still exists and reflects the continuing strength of the humanities at a place like Columbia. At other institutions I expect that this war is long over as evidenced by the periodical-to-book ratios I hear discussed by those spending 80 or more percent of their budgets on scientific periodicals. Although we experienced a burst of new library construction, we have not kept up with increased enrollments.

Financially, the picture for higher education has changed enormously. With the G.I. Bill and the Higher Education Acts of 1964 and 1965 it seemed that the flow of Federal money to America's colleges and universities was going to continue forever. The Reagan-Bush years and then the recession proved that. But those who took the trend of reduced state funding on the defensive and those who took a positive approach to what they had and did about it, said that "It's not a budget problem, it's a political problem." And so it is. Because of tenure, faculty members publish. Because they publish, journals flourish. Because journals flourish, STM publishers can charge as much as they like. Because they charge so much, libraries are in crisis. We don't have enough funds to buy books or new digital tools. Therefore, we develop alternative strategies. The STM serials problem is just one example. We are not alone in this. Libraries everywhere are experiencing the same problems. We are not alone in our crisis. So let's be pragmatic, and let's move along.