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Op—Ed — Opinions and Editorials

The Pursuit of Learning — Still Our Job!

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Reading **Tom Leonhardt's** "Letter From Oklahoma: Bookish or Boorish?" in the November *Against the Grain* brought forth many memories. It evoked thoughts about **Lawrence Clark Powell** and other fine librarians we read and talked about in library school. Why did we go to library school? What attracted us to the profession? I have always been enamored of words, of an exquisite turn of phrase, or how an author can portray a vivid scene with words. Years ago, most of these wonderful words were encased in books and to me, a fine book, both physical object and content, is the highest form of art. What better job could one hope for than to work in a setting with both books and readers.

As a medical librarian for thirty years, I have had the opportunity to see the many changes in our profession. In the 1960s the librarians I tried to emulate were individuals who understood the literature of medicine. In order to answer questions or catalog volumes they had to read and study the contents of books and journals. Medical literature is full of literary treasures of introducing these works to readers and helping students on their way to becoming physicians.

The changes brought about by technology have given added stature to librarians as they assumed new responsibilities, learned new skills, and joined in new electronic ventures with faculty departments and computer centers. These are exciting changes, but one of the disappointments brought about by automation is that librarians have come to rely on the database search to prepare bibliographies. They are missing out on the reading and evaluating of articles that used to be the norm before automation. To me, this reading and learning was the reward and the challenge of being a librarian.

Estelle Brodman, one of the most distinguished of medical librarians, said in 1979 that a library was expected to be a "preserver of antiques, a transmitter of data, an interpreter of facts, an educationist institution, a problem solver, an institution catering to the elite, but also offering egalitarian-like services to other groups without 'clout', and a research institution studying new technologies." And she added that all of this would have to be staffed by scholars who are also businessmen and who would work for cheap wages! (See *Proceedings of the Allerton Invitational Conference on Education for Health Sciences Librarianship*, Chicago, Medical Library Association, 1979, p.ix.)

It is interesting that more than a decade later these functions still apply. Whether you are talking about a traditional or a virtual library, those are the functions that define our work. All of them have one thing in common — they relate to learning. Rather than concern about how many resources we can find on the Internet or how much one can retrieve without leaving a workstation, we should be concerned with the extent and quality of learning. Do our students learn better now than before automation. In the medical field we are talking about young people who will be your physicians and the scientists who will check the advances in treating disease. Are they better prepared, more learned because of the information highway?

I am not interested in debating the value of the library without walls versus the library as a building. I am interested in the library

as the center of learning, the place where knowledge abounds, the place where the librarian, the most knowledgeable of individuals in the realm of information and how to find it and evaluate it, is ready to help all comers. Because after you have surfed the net and scanned the databases and catalogs and gleaned and fathered the sources of your interest, you still do not have knowledge until you ready and study. In other words, learn.

Having material on your computer does not mean you have learned it. The popular slogan of today, "access not ownership" does not ring true for access does not guarantee availability. If a publication is not on the shelf or on your file server, will students ever see it? What can you offer that duplicates the ability to scan journal issues or dip into many books on a topic? Having a wide array of resources available to students forms the basis of their continuing education practices. Reading a variety of sources is essential if one is to become skilled in identifying the best quality and in winnowing out the dross that exists in the literature of all disciplines.

Studying medicine is a long and arduous undertaking. It requires many hours of reading as well as time for thinking. Medicine is not just a matter of learning facts, although it is estimated that a student will have to learn some 50,000 facts during four years of medical school. Medicine and science are built on the experiments and theories of many, built on the false starts, the controversies, and the great strides that have come over the centuries. Using only the MEDLINE database with a beginning date of 1966, is not sufficient to learn how medicine developed to its current status. Medicine did not begin in 1966, contrary to the idea of many students who find it too tedious to think of searching earlier print indexes.

Our students are entitled to the best resources available, those materials that are necessary for understanding and knowledge of a discipline. It is the content, not the container, that assures learning. And the job of selecting and evaluating these resources and then making sure that students can use them is the responsibility of librarians. It is also something that librarians do better than anyone else in the information arena.

Whatever you choose to call it, the library is the place where students and readers come to find the latest information and to read from the treasures of the past. It is the place where the collections, in whatever format, support scholarship and research, where librarians help users make the connections, where curiosity and questioning are encouraged and welcomed.

Charles M. Vest, president of Massachusetts Institute of Technology, said in his recent annual report that "it is the pursuit of the truly unknown — of principles, insights, materials, and organisms of which we currently have no inkling — that will yield the greatest rewards for a society that invests in education, scholarship and research ..." (quoted in the December 15, 1995 issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, p.B5).

Is not being the center of that pursuit what librarianship is all about? In the pursuit of learning is where we make our most significant contributions, where we continue to learn and where we foster learning for our students, our faculty, our readers. 🐼