21st Century Academic Library: The Promise, the Plan, a Response

Loretta Parham
The Atlanta Center Robert W. Woodruff Library, lparham@auctr.edu

21st Century Academic Library: The Promise, the Plan, a Response

Presented by Loretta Parham, The Atlanta Center Robert W. Woodruff Library
Moderated by Glenda Alvin, Tennessee State University

The following is a transcription of a live presentation at the 2017 Charleston Conference.

Glenda Alvin: Good morning. Loretta Parham is the 2017 Association for Colleges and Research Libraries Academic Research Librarian of the year. She began her career as a school media specialist and then progressed to leadership positions with Chicago Public Library and the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh. Her academic library career began as director of the Harvey Library at Hampton University, and for the past 13 years she has been the chief executive officer and director of the Robert W. Woodruff Library at Atlanta University. As a model of a library that shows exemplary service in supporting the missions of its institutions, the Woodruff Library achieved the ACRL Excellence in Libraries Academic Award in 2016. Loretta is the co-founding director of the HBCU Library Alliance and is founding board chair. Through her transformative and visionary leadership, the historically black colleges and universities in this consortium have benefited from several Andrew Mellon grants, which have enhanced library services related to leadership, photographic preservation, digitization services, and faculty research support. I'm a graduate of the HBCU Libraries' Leadership Institute and our library at Tennessee State has been enriched by its participation in the Digital Collections Program, which has made our founding documents globally accessible. Among her many contributions to our profession, Loretta has served on the ACRL Board of Directors, is a member of the OCLC Board of Trustees, and the ALA Committee on Accreditation. Her publications include coauthoring *Achieving Diversity: A How to Do It Manual*, and she has published an article on her work with digitizing the Martin Luther King Jr. papers in the RBM, a journal of rare books, manuscripts, and cultural heritage. Let's give a warm Charleston welcome to Loretta Parham.

Loretta Parham: Well, good morning. Someone asked me earlier, they said, I think it was Glenda, had I attended the Charleston Conference before? And I must say unfortunately never, ever. I've had plenty of colleagues who have attended and perhaps several out there today, but I will be back. Also, when I come to this hall, my goodness! Don't you just want to stand up and sing? It's my moment. So I'm just going to talk. You know, I have this speech, but I don't know if I'll stick to it. I'll tell you that ahead of time.

When I awoke a few Sunday mornings ago back on October 15, I first checked the time and then my e-mail. The work e-mail and the personal e-mail and then of course next I, old school, checked Facebook. Thanks to Jim Neal, our current president of ALA, who one might think really has too much time on his hands because he just really shares, tweets, and clicks a lot of information, but he seems to be able to do that, and he consistently shares with other people like you and I that are passionate about what we do. He forwarded a link to what is now, I think, the infamous *USA Today* careers article that cited the eight jobs that won't exist in 2030. I'm sure several of you saw it and some of you probably also saw the reaction of our colleagues professionally to that article. But that article, it listed the following jobs: social media manager, word processor, travel agent, telemarketer, receptionist, cashier, paper boy and paper girl, and at the top of the list, number one position: librarian. The rationale for the listing of the librarian position seemed only to be based upon the surveyed public dislike for books and their preference for e-books, as if we couldn't make that migration. The position of social media manager, which was number eight on the list, was justified with reasoning that said, "the popularity of social media itself will force out the managers because the public is becoming expert in using media." I hope you all responded to the *USA Today* article.

When I joined this profession in the '70s, the big conversation professionally was intellectual freedom. It was the value upon which we all hung our hat. It was a value that we were passionate about and that drove us to do our work in community, and I look forward and anticipate that this next generation/current generation of emerging leaders within our profession are also going to make their voices heard and known around issues which are important to this democratic country.

So, true enough, our environment is changing, has changed, and will continue to change. In John Palfrey's book *Born Digital*, he says that librarians are focused on the pool of traditional knowledge: books, journals, case studies, and should focus more on

helping others to manage the rivers of digital information that they encounter every day. This change in mindset means something has to change and much more quickly in our libraries and information centers than it currently is doing. Those rivers, that drowning in information that is characteristic of the digital age, demands a librarian, a professional that is current in the industry knowledge, fluent in communications, and knowledgeable in any of a number of specialty hard skills. It is less about the integration of technology and more about helping students and faculty of the academy to stay afloat and swim vigorously down those rivers of digital information.

ACRL, in their top trends, talked about the emerging staff positions. This was in their top trends of 2016, and they said that position postings for librarian and information science professionals looked for a familiarity with technology and technical support with focus on the user experience, support for virtual services, digital humanities, and knowledge management. The corporate sector is also increasingly interested in professionals with these skill sets; add to that collaboration, teamwork, and communications. Educause, which is the organization of IT individuals in higher education, and their top 10 trends for 2017 also cites sustainable staffing, and they say ensuring adequate staffing capacity and staff retention as budgets shrink or remain flat and as external competition grows is extremely important. They cite many risks but one such risk is trying to lead a 21st-century IT organization with support from a 20th-century HR organization. All parts of the institution need to adapt to new business practices and markets; ignoring workforce challenges risks lowering staff engagement and increasing burnout. I think this is strong messaging and one that we in our libraries must take seriously. We're at quite a moment of change in many ways. I think that right now the most significant change is happening with staffing. Who is doing the work? Who is the right person at the right time and the right place? Who are we hiring and who are we retaining and what kind of leverage do we have to do those things?

But, as technology changes, so does the audience and our constituents as well. We know about the baby boomers, that's me, and we know that we are all retiring, and we know about the millennials, that's probably many of you, but who is this new generation of learners that's coming to the door? Let's call them Generation "I" or Generation "Z" depending on what literature you're reading. A group that is approaching our steps and from all indications will certainly require a different agenda for the delivery

of information services. But, before they arrive let's consider this 21st-century library. David Lewis, who many of you may know from IUPUI, wrote a book, *Reimagining the Academic Library*, and David and I agree on many things. From his book he promotes the things that should be done now if the academic library is to remain essential. He talks about retiring our legacy print collections now. We should be able to continue our reliance on research libraries that continue to commit resources for storage and access to legacy print collections. That's my belief. At the college library, at anything other than an ARL, we need to rely upon the research-level libraries to take care and provide access to those print collections and use our resources and our effort and our time and our space to really engage with and deliver to this generation in a way that they will expect. We need to develop a space plan as we repurpose space after we have freed space from the print materials. We need a materials budget strategy to manage the changing business model as it is related to publishing. We need to support local scholarly content, I'm probably preaching to the choir here, and we need to commit to special collections and make the investment in staff collections processes and systems. I believe in that strongly, particularly being in the environment in which I come from at the Atlanta University Center, and I should pause and tell you who we are. And I'll do that in a second, okay? I'll come back to this committing to special collections.

We should also infuse the curriculum with our knowledge and skills, and we should know our library demographics: who is working with us and what their skill sets are and what their qualifications are, and then we need to hire talent to fill in the gaps. We need to get the library's culture right. The library organization should be prepared to change, take risks, innovate, and have in place proactive plans for our operations. And we need to support a network of library services out there and, finally, the academic library and its leadership, we need to sell the change, share the success with our stakeholders and we need to do it over and over and over and over again. That's probably one of the more common speeches, or I shouldn't say speeches, one of the more common remarks or comments that I make in my own environment. Staff will come up with some wonderful initiative, some wonderful program, and working with faculty, as precious as they are, they will share this information and send it on to faculty and then they wait. Well, we know what that means. I cannot say it enough, you cannot, and I am not in denial about the popularity necessarily of "library"

with some individuals. I think that whatever it is we want to sell, we have to do it not once, not twice, not three times, not even four times. We need to sell, promote, and market repeatedly over and over and over and over and over and over and over again until our constituents say "Aha." Because once they come, as we all know, once they discover us, we should have them for life.

So, who are we? I'll say that for you before I go on. I am CEO and director of the Atlanta University Center. It is a consortium of four independent colleges. They are each—all of them—historically black colleges and universities (HBCU), which means that they were established for purposes of educating freed slaves and African Americans. Most of those institutions which constitute the HBCU were founded in the late 1800s. The institutions I serve were established in 1868, 1870s, 1890s. All four of the institutions I serve, Spelman, which is a women's school, Morehouse is the men's school, Clark Atlanta University, which is a research-level institution, and then the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC), which houses six seminaries. They are all independent of one another. Many years ago they came together and said, "Let's save ourselves some space and time and create a shared library." The brilliance is overwhelming to me. These presidents decided to do that and in 1981 they took all of their individual collections and all of the staff in those buildings and put them in one space. They built a new building, the building I'm in now, 220,000 square feet, and placed all the materials from each institution and staff in that facility for this shared library. And the library operated very well for several years, many years. And then it didn't, because the library director was reporting to provosts. Now, I love those provosts. But, if you report to more than one that can be a problem. So, conditions became so bad that vendors would not even acknowledge a request for orders because they weren't sure when they would get their check. The staff, the students, and the faculty did not look to the library for services. They looked far up the street. So they became vicious users of the collections of the public library, of Georgia State University, Emory University, Georgia Tech, and others around us. Finally, SACS, which is our accreditation body, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, kind of dinged a couple of the institutions at the time of their reaffirmation. Well, that's enough to get the attention of the president, and so then the presidents sat down together and they commissioned a group to do a study to make recommendations for informing and for improving the library. That particular study was called the Frye

Report because it was chaired by Billy Frye, then provost of Emory University, and on its committee included Deanna Marcum and JoAnn Williams and Jim Williams, and they offered eight strategic recommendations to improve library services in the Atlanta University Center. Among those recommendations, the most important and the most transformative was the suggestion to incorporate the library as its own entity. The second was to improve the funding stream, and the third was to recruit for sustainable, stable leadership. Now there were five other very important ones but for the purposes of our communication today, these three stand on top.

Incorporating the library as its own nonprofit entity meant that the library director, and thus the title CEO and Library Director, really ran our own company. I like to say we buy our light bulbs, we hire the staff to put the light bulbs in, we decide when to change the light bulbs, what kind of light bulbs they are, and when to take them out. So, use that analogy across all aspects of operations. I report to a board of trustees, which includes the presidents of each of these institutions as well as a couple of faculty from various representations and then three at-large members from outside of the Atlanta University Center. In terms of the funding stream, we have this wonderful strategy. I just love this, you know when I get back to work we're going to have our budget meeting. My budget for the next school year will be approved in this December and once it's approved, when it's time, the library will simply debit the accounts of the schools twice a year to retrieve the approved assessment for operations. So, I'm not waiting on them. And there is a wonderful rule at the AUC Consortium that says that among the members if you don't pay your bill, if you don't maintain accreditation, you cannot have library services. So simple. So precious.

The third recommendation I want to highlight was that of sustainable leadership. So, before I came to Woodruff, in a 10-year period there had been six different library directors. This was during the time of terror is what I'm going to call it. The "reign of terror," yes. And no one who cared anything about their personal, professional development career would think about applying for that job, certainly not I. However, when the platform was changed, when the infrastructure was changed, and at that time the presidents brought in Elaine Sloan who had recently retired from Columbia University and brought her to the AUC Woodruff Library to help them place an infrastructure in place and to help them recruit, with that done, then when they knock on your door you

say, "Okay, I'll take a look." So I started there in 2004 and have been there ever since, and we have been working successfully to transform our institution.

So our mission and our vision is there [Referring to slide]. In brief, our mission is to provide the highest level of information resources and services and preservation. And then, too, the vision to reflect the excellence of our member institutions and they are excellent. We take strategic planning very seriously at our institution. I do. One of my many jobs in the past was at Chicago Public Library back in the day when strategic planning had just kind of hit the management scene. This was in the '80s, we worked with what was then Peat, Marwick, and Mitchell; they've changed their names a number of times since then, I think they are KPMG now. And they did a strategic plan for the Chicago Public Library and I had the responsibility and opportunity to serve as the liaison between the vendor and the library on our plan. That was a very aggressive plan, and as I'm recalling it now, someday I really must write about it. Talk about strategic planning, and environmental scans, we conducted 50 focus groups throughout the city to talk about how to influence and impact the library. Since then I've always appreciated and understood the value of planning. We talk about it often, many of us plan and we put that plan on the shelf and we keep doing what we're doing; it doesn't work like that. At Woodruff Library we are in our fourth iteration of planning and every year we make the effort to talk about and work on the plan. Every July we have what is called "spirit week" at the library and all staff meet, all staff, security, professional librarians, IT, all of us meet together to review the plan and to put in place annual work plans, and everything that is done at the library is based upon the priority and objectives of the plan, and I am confident that because of this strategy we have been able to make the changes necessary for transformation.

So, coming back to this 21st-century library mentioned earlier, I was recalling another article I read previously and it talked about the new vocabulary and the old vocabulary. I invite you, when you're just sitting around doing nothing, perhaps flying back home, to create your own chart of old vocabulary and new vocabulary for our industry. It's pretty interesting. The students, the learners, this new generation of learners that we will see, they really, at least the ones I've bumped into, they have little value, little consideration for many of the things that fit into our old vocabulary. [Referring to slide] So, what does it mean to them when we talk about newspapers and bibliography and library class and catalogs,

etc.? These are the behind-the-scenes activities, the behind-the-scenes services and resources, which we understand are very important, but until the vocabulary changes and until we share that change in vocabulary with our constituents, it will make it difficult to respond and to continue to keep those advocates for libraries in our camps.

This generation "Z," this is the group that I have said to librarians that I work with that we must be ready for, and if you have done any review of who this generation "Z" is you will know one thing, those that were born in 2012 will be knocking on the doors of academic college libraries shortly and this group is different. This group has lived with technology all of their lives. If you consider the fact that when they were born all these disruptive technologies occurred, so they are very accustomed to change. They're very accustomed to the fact that things continue to evolve, and in fact they have an expectation that the particular service or resource that we share with them today, they really are expecting us to come out with something different next year, if not sooner. Perhaps on the other side of it we're thinking, "Okay, I've introduced this, now I can rest for five years or so." I don't think so. They are characterized in some literature accordingly as being "phigital," that is, they've always had tools in their hands to identify, enhance, and distribute to the world their own personal brand, so they are a physical and digital mix, phigital.

On the next slide we see "hyper-custom," they expect the world to customize for them. They've always had retailers responding to their needs and their behaviors, so think of Instagram, Amazon, Google, etc. In college they will want to customize that experience, picking their own degree, determining how to complete an assignment. They stop and they learn only as needed, so it is not "just in case." It is "as needed" and they hit pause and play based upon their rate of comprehension per task. They are realistic. Their experience has been lock-down drills and active shooter policies and terrorism at home and online. For baby boomers, our experience was tornado drills in the hallway of the school. This generation sees a result of not protecting things like climate warming, lead in water, chemicals in food, and they've never seen the government collaborate during their lifetime. Life is real to them and they don't want to wander in this land of possibility. FOMO—they have a fear of missing out. Some of us have that disease too, so you know what that is. Always, always, always personally swiping all the time. Swiping of the phone screen to check for

incoming information, friend chat, tweets, grades, teacher feedback, fashion, celebrity news, weather changes, always signed on, information always a click away, and unlike other generations, this generation is totally dependent on this form of socializing and communicating. They do not know nor want a world where anyone is not connected.

Now, my eldest granddaughter who is 12 years old and is at home. I took her phone away from her last week because she told me a lie and I told her she couldn't have it back for a couple of weeks until November 30. She is distraught. Oh my gosh, as I was leaving to go to the airport yesterday morning, she woke up early, they had no school because of election day, she woke up early and she sat on the sofa at the door and looked at me with the most pitiful, puppy-like look as if, "Grandma, surely you're not going to leave town and not give me my phone?" But to make sure she didn't "find iPhone," I took the phone with me and placed it in my car that I left parked at the airport.

This generation are economists. They are "we economists." They believe in sharing of goods and service and think that that makes sense. It is better to share since we don't all need to own the same thing, so again, Ecomoto, Airbnb, Uber, etc., do it yourself, they look at everything as a do-it-yourself. They don't trust institutions to do things for them after watching so many of them fail. They believe that the smartest thing is to not rely upon someone else, vis-à-vis the rise of homeschooling, which really is shared by the millennial generation as well and they are driven. The participation award means nothing to Gen "Z." That was for millennials who are more about effort and not about outcomes. Reality is a factor, Gen Z-ers understand winning and losing, but they want to know why they lose so that they can win the next time. They have not had to grow up to technology, they grew up with technology, they didn't have to accept it; this generation expects it. I think to go on and to be able to satisfy this hunger and this expectation, we will need to change how we're doing and what we're doing in libraries.

We will certainly need to change, for example, the mix of library staffing. Perhaps we will need to have fewer support and student staff and more professional staff. We need a change in the mix of professional staff, more with special skills, technical, fewer generalists and more without the MLS. I know at my library to get some of the work done that I need to have done I am

going to have to turn and bring in some individuals, professionals, without the MLS. I'll also note, if you will pay attention to what's happening in library and information schools, yes the library name is going away from many of them, Information Science is more prominent and also the introduction of the bachelor's in Information Science is becoming popular and more attainable. The student who has that bachelor's in Information Science has a place, certainly, in my library. And, of course, salary expectations, they are continuing to rise. This new group is demanding, they know they are in demand and they're asking for more and more and more money. So, we have to reallocate and rethink how we are operating.

So, I'm going to skip over a few things because I was just signaled by Anthony that I have 10, probably 9 minutes, left now, so I'll skip some material because I want to quickly show you this clip. [Referring to slide] This is the AUC Woodruff Library Archives Research Center. We have a particularly important responsibility and role as we look forward and think about the future of the library and indeed the future of our society. At the AUC Woodruff Library we take very seriously the opportunity to preserve the record history of those institutions we serve, and to preserve the work of the heroes and sheroes who have come through those corridors. Consequently, I made a pledge when I started my employment there, and I stick by it even today, being that no matter what, at no time will positions and activities go underfunded and unresourced in the library's Archive Research Center. Through the utility of our institutional repository, we have been successful in getting some faculty to mount their open journals on the site. The digital collections that are attributable to these HBCUs enable us to raise up again the institutional records and history of our schools. I invite you to read the article in *Rare Books and Manuscripts* that I wrote about our experience as custodians of the Morehouse College Martin Luther King Jr. Collection; and then, please, ask me to share at another time that experience and how the strategic plan in place made the AUC Woodruff Library the right fit at the right time. Let's show the video created and produced by the staff of the AUC Woodruff Library. [Video playing]

[After the video] Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you about the academic library for the 21st century, the value of our promise, the importance of our plan, and the requirements for our response. Thank you.