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Op-Ed

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Op-Ed — Opinions and Editorials

A Not-So-Modest Proposal (With Apologies to Jonathan Swift) — Library Education: The Cutting Edge?

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First, the good news: As academic librarians, we see ourselves as providers of information services. Next, the bad news: As academic librarians, we are prepared only to work in college and university or research libraries.

Fortunately, we librarians see ourselves as part of the information industry. We have embraced new technologies and incorporated online searching, CD-ROMs, and integrated library systems as tools we use daily. Gopher, Mosaic, and World Wide Web are part of our vocabulary when speaking about gaining access to information on the Internet. Many of us who entered the profession expecting to serve out a career as a reference librarian or cataloger now find ourselves running the Systems office, or formatting documents for the Web in HTML.

Still, we seem to be stuck in the notion that we can only work in libraries. Libraries are wonderful institutions; however, the term "library" often refers to a collection itself, rather than identifying the services librarians provide. Corporate libraries are frequently referred to as information centers, while the collection of references, journals or CD-ROMs is the part known as a library. Are new librarians prepared to work in the information industry? Or is library education continuing to produce people who will ply their trade specifically in libraries?

Our Preparation

There is the story about the ice companies that went out of business soon after the development of electrically-cooled ice boxes. Thinking there was still a need for their traditional services, the ice brokers continued to ship large blocks of ice throughout the U.S. — all obtained at significant expense from colder, Arctic climates. Imagine the surprise of the ice barons when people found it more convenient (and eventually, less expensive and safer) to purchase electrical appliances manufactured by Westinghouse, for instance, than to take shipment on a huge block of ice! As a vendor/CEO used to say, "The ice companies thought they were in the ice business, but they were really in the refrigeration business."

Similarly, there is a disturbing analogy between the railroads and library schools. The folks who ran railroads thought they were in the railroad rather than the transportation business, and the Interstate Highway System, along with the trucking industry, almost wiped out commercial freight railroading in the U.S. Perhaps it is time we looked at our own profession and asked if library schools are still pre-

paring graduates to work in libraries, rather than the information industry. The closing of library schools (according to ALA's Office for Accreditation, eleven accredited programs have been closed since 1985) is in inverse proportion to the growth within the information industry. It may be time to retool the curriculum, provide graduates with a greater breadth of career options, and help those who choose more traditional careers at the same time.

The Need

Librarians are usually knowledgeable and committed to providing service. They have an understanding of how information is accessed and used. These are skills that are needed in companies that: create databases (IAC, CAS, ISI), develop software applications (BRS, CD+, IDI), develop integrated library systems

(DRA, III, Dynix), publish (Bowker, Gale, Elsevier), vend journals (EBSCO, Dawson, Readmore), or vend books (Academic Book Center, BNA, Yankee Book, Baker & Taylor). Look around the exhibits at your next conference. Don't you value those companies that have managed to find librarians or train their staff to understand your expectations as a consumer? It's not easy to find qualified people who understand libraries and are willing to work in marketing, sales, customer service or product development. And this problem affects both the vendor and the client library. As one librarian recently lamented, "I'm tired of training my reps!" She had received three calls that week from new sales representatives who did not know libraries. From the vendor side, it is a challenge to find qualified employees who understand libraries or better yet,

librarians who understand the profit sector. Perhaps one source of personnel for those companies should be the products of our library schools, but few "real" librarians choose careers on the vendor side.

The Gap

The majority of library school graduates go to work in academic, public or school libraries all of which are in the non-profit sector. According to the 1995 *Bowker Annual of Library and Book Trade Information*, there were 2,523 new graduates from accredited library schools in 1993. Of those, only 39, or 1.5%, went into vendor-related positions. These included two in booktrade sales, ten in database publishing/servicing, ten in "nonlibrary" information services, two in networks or consortia, and 15 in automated systems. [Source: *Bowker Annual of Library and Book Trade Information*, volume 40, New York: R.R. Bowker, 1995, pp.384, 387.]

We are accustomed to managing budgets from the expenditure side, but typically do not generate revenue. Most of us have not been equipped with an understanding of the free enterprise principles upon which our economy is based — and if we possess that background and understanding, we obtained it outside of our library training. There is an acculturation process which takes place in library schools, and it focuses on service in the non-profit sector. This approach rarely provides any understanding of business principles, including marketing or economics. The socialization of librarians emphasizes the development of a common vocabulary, creating an understanding and appreciation of intellectual freedom issues, literacy, and access to information for all. Service training is also part of the socialization process: librarians learn how to be open, accessible, and how to train others to be that way. Library schools teach about the importance of standards, of resource sharing, of maintaining bibliographic integrity. All of these are valuable parts of the whole that is library school. But is it possible that we do ourselves a disservice as a profession when we neglect the "business" side of the business? When one considers that many of our budgeting problems of the last ten years stem from the rise of information as a hot commodity, paired with the vicissitudes of the international monetary exchange market, might it not be of value for us to learn about those markets in the safety of our graduate programs? Would we not benefit as a profession if we developed

continued on page 26

Op-Ed from page 25

an appreciation for what keeps a service provider (for profit or not) financially healthy, so that we are able to discern that a company is in distress before we have to make panic decisions about whether to continue to do business with it?

The Opportunity

Positions in the information industry require additional business training that sometimes runs contrary to the acculturation process in library school. A degree that would provide graduates with a background in computers and telecommunication applications, libraries and the organization of information, and basic business training in economics, marketing and management would open a world of opportunity in both the profit and non-profit sectors. We would have the benefits of more business-like decision making on the purchasing side, and of more library-like selling on the vendor side. Communication could only improve, and the products and services we need in libraries would be that much more likely to make it to market. Librarians are trained to be responsive, service-oriented professionals. Those librarians working in the vendor community would understand the needs, concerns, and orientation of their library-based peers, and have the capability to convey that understanding to their parent organizations. Librarians who purchase from such vendors know that those companies have a special commitment to the library marketplace.

"[Are] library schools . . . preparing graduates to work in libraries, rather than the information industry?"

General Benefits

The benefits of expanding the curriculum of library education are many. Among these are the following:

- Librarians working in traditional academic, public and school libraries would have a better understanding of their vendors. They would be better prepared to express their expectations to vendors and negotiate for products. Librarians working in corporations would be able to explain the value of the information center in terms that upper management would understand.
- Graduates working for non-profit professional associations (MLA, SLA, ALA) would understand how to generate the revenue needed to implement the goals of the organizations. Graduates working for private industry would

bring a market focus to organizations that would increase the value of the publications, products and services offered to our

market.

- The job market for MLS holders would be more flexible, and offer more options for new graduates. The better salaries offered by most vendors might also help to raise the overall compensation packages for beginning librarians.
- Vendors would be able to hire new sales/marketing professionals who would require little or no training in the nature of library marketplace issues.
- Even librarians who choose not to go into

the for-profit sector would have exposure to marketing and economics courses in their graduate library school curricula. This would make them better buyers — more aware of the issues and economics affecting our marketplace. And it would prepare them to convey

those issues to their funding agencies, be it the city council or the university administration. When faced with prices which exceed the allocated budget, those li-

brarians would not be as likely to feel victimized by the "system."

- Both groups (those employed by libraries, and those who have become vendor/librarians) would have the opportunity to participate as peers and colleagues in other arenas, such as the professional associations. Such collaborative efforts will also foster better communication and create partnerships where they are sorely needed.

The Future

Today, we find ourselves part of an information industry, strongly affected by new technology. The information business is growing fast and changing in ways we had never imagined. It's time to assess the opportunities that exist, as they are a sure indicator of the trends for the future. The information industry is the most exciting place to be in this century. Librarians have the opportunity to provide services of a truly invaluable nature to our fellows. If we broaden our understanding of the dynamics at work throughout the industry, we will be able to contribute our expertise and build on our heritage rather than become specialists in a limited portion of the market.

Rumors from page 14

Corrie Marsh is a pistol. She's become Southeastern Rep (VA, NC, SC, FL, and GA) for Ovid Technologies. Corrie will stay at 8182 Bell Creek Rd.; Mechanicsville, VA 23111; phone (804) 730-6444; fax (804) 730-4990. <cmarsh@ovid.com> or <cmarsh@richmond.infi.net> Congrats, Corrie!

Tove Rosado writes a wonderful note to us Charleston Conference types. She has retired and is now spending 2-3 months in her native Denmark. Keep smiling, Tove, but don't forget all your friends back here in the good old U.S. of A.

Gordon Graham, Editor of LOGOS, and an incredibly patient man, writes that LOGOS — celebrating its seventh year of publication — is planning a special single-theme issue in 1996 on "The book in the United States today." Gordon — who has been trying to get a Charleston Conference paper out of Judy Webster and me for over a year — has sent a list of the twenty in-depth articles to be written by Sandra Whisler, Hendrik Edelman, Mary Somerville, Dick Abel, Steve Mason, Judy Holoviak, Eric Newman, Donald Lamm, and Pieter Bolman to name just a few. I am looking forward to reading it. Here's

the address — 5 Beechwood Drive, Marlow, Bucks SL7 3DH, UK, phone and fax 01628-477577.

In response to demand for a secure menuing system for public access PCs, CARL Corporation has released Everybody's Menu Builder™, a menu management system derived from CARL's popular Everybody's Catalog graphical interface. Everybody's Menu Builder™ software helps libraries organize all of their PC-based information resources (CD ROM databases, Web Browsers and other third party applications) from a single interface. Everybody's Menu Builder™ uses colorful icons and large, legible buttons to facilitate navigation. Similar information resources may be grouped under hierarchical headings. Everybody's Menu Builder™ also enhances security at public workstations. User access is limited to the resources the library defines for inclusion in the Menu Builder's window. As users launch and exit applications or databases they always return to the Menu Builder. A password is required to gain access to Windows or DOS. Windows "system keys" are also disabled, preventing savvy users from breaking out of the Everybody's Menu Builder environment. Everybody's Menu Builder is ideal for use by non-CARL libraries, or by CARL libraries which have Windows PC environments but have not yet implemented Everybody's Catalog. For more information

continued on page 44