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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 glacially but the contents they serve up, especially in the sciences and even the social sciences, have changed radically during this same 50 years. Perhaps libraries 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 burst of traditional-aged students; the influx of older, returned students; the emergence of the research university the mega-univer-

sity; 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, depends upon who "we" are. At Columbia the conflict between the humanities and the sciences for library resources still exists and reflects the continued 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 that 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 to be wrong. Tax-cutting seems to be part of our culture. Private institutions like Columbia are somewhat sheltered but State-supported institutions are very much aware that the good old days are past. With less money we have talked the more-with-less game but in many cases we are doing less with less. Tuition increases are an accepted part of education as is debt for one's education. Students are working more and the four years to graduation experience is gone for most students. I wish I had known the 1980's were the golden years of higher education, I would have enjoyed them more.

What has been the response of academic libraries to the financial woes of our institutions? Like all good bureaucrats we have fought for our turf. Just because times are tough it doesn't mean that we have to suffer. We fight for the right of STM journal publishers to increase their prices by at least 10% per year. We fight to retain our multi-layered bureaucracies developed when the Federal funds flowed

more freely.

We play the technology

card, automation will save money — give us technology money and we'll show you how it works. We play the out-source card, catalogers in remote Ohio or Texas towns will catalog more cheaply under assembly plant conditions than their library faculty counter-parts. We spend 20-30 percent of our time in meetings strategically planning what should be done to do more with less. We fight for more money, to buy more print and digital stuff, to store in more buildings and computers, because this is how it is done.

The other day when talking about the STM serials problem (it's great to have this problem around; it's clear who are the good and bad guys) someone said the problem was tenure. Because of tenure, faculty members publish. Because they publish, journals flourish. Because journals flourish, STM publishers can charge so much. Because they charge so much, libraries are in crisis: We don't have enough funds to buy books or new digital tools. Therefore, do away with tenure. It is an attractive proposition. However, think about what would happen to libraries if tenure were abolished: Within a short time the volume of articles written would be much reduced, journals would fold, serials departments would be reduced to a single person who comes in on Mondays and Fridays, collection development bureaucrats like me would have to fight for desk work to keep busy, etc., you get the idea.

Hutchins, as was noted, said that changes in universities took place over the dead bodies of 10,000 resisting professors. Professors, it seems, don't die easily or quickly. Perhaps that is why university change is so glacial. For those looking forward to revolutionary changes in libraries, don't hold your breath. For those fearful of loosing their jobs to computers, perhaps take card playing lessons. Seriously, we all need to remind ourselves daily of why we are here: to bring people and information they need together as quickly and efficiently as possible. 🐼