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Back Talk —Print Libraries in the Digital Future

by **Anthony W. Ferguson** (Associate University Librarian, Columbia University) <ferguson@columbia.edu>

Occasionally the question occurs to me: Why do so few faculty and students come to the library? Over the years, with other librarians' comments, answers have suggested themselves: Students just want to graduate and get a job—libraries aren't needed for that to occur. The curriculum is textbook-oriented—libraries are superfluous. Our libraries are too cramped because of the lack of university support—and so students stay away. The faculties have their collections—they don't need ours. The faculties have networks of colleagues who share with them information, off prints, etc.—they don't need our resources. And the all time favorite for the sciences: cutting edge faculty don't use published information—our expensive journals are just there so that faculty can get tenure. Librarians even have standards, which support the idea that libraries need seats for less than 20% of their students. Yet, the question lingers, why don't they come and why are our expectations so low? All of the reasons above do have one factor in common: they aren't our fault.

I recently read an interesting report of an international meeting held in Paris in 1998*. The attendees were a combination of architects and library administrators from 28 countries. They were interested in determining what the library of the future would be like. **Here are some of their conclusions. They felt that in the future libraries would:**

- Continue "to provide a viable, identifiable and physical image" for higher education institutions with which to attract students, teachers and researchers;
- Continue to protect our cultural heritage;
- Train and retrain students, to make effective use of networked electronic resources so that they can successfully navigate the digital world, particularly the increasing numbers of distance students many of whom are not as technologically savvy as regular students;
- Need to be very flexible to adapt to "rapid and unpredictable technological development";
- Need to be actively involved in obtaining permissions before materials could be digitized for class Web pages;
- Need to increase the speed at which they provide access to print materials; and to
- Reorient their physical environments to accommodate the needs of students working in teams or in groups who are being taught using increasing amounts of technology.

In a way, many of these conclusions are reassuring. American libraries, my own included, are certainly heavily involved in the preservation of the world's intellectual heri-

tage. We're training students in droves to use the Web. Many libraries are typically among the most advanced users of computer technology, and we are obsessed with copyright—it seems every librarian is annually attending or giving a licensing workshop.

But we are clearly not doing as much as we might in some of these areas:

- As we add electronic resources that are seamlessly linked to one another, we are in danger of becoming less identifiable as the sources of this expensive and valuable information.
- As our print collections continue to grow, our libraries become more complex to use and the national trend seems to be to send more and more material to remote storage sites. It is becoming slower, not faster, to use print resources.
- We have group study rooms but not nearly so many as are needed. At night when students go to libraries (and librarians largely go home—I do), entire reading areas become group study areas.

What should we be doing? How can we become a more "identifiable" image with which to attract students and faculty? This coincides with two additional, but conflicting issues: First, how can we insure that our students understand that some of the resources they are accessing, because they are IP range authenticated, are there as a result of our having paid for them. Second, how can we do that without appearing to be co-branding or supporting one publisher over another? For example, students can do Internet searches using a search engine using a library terminal, or get to the Web through a campus server, and find they have access to a fulltext database like JSTOR. They think they found this material because of their searching prowess, when it is also because their library is paying several thousand dollars per year to make it possible. On the other hand, if they require the vendor to attach the university's logo to the resource for those coming through specific IP ranges, some librarians feel it makes it appear that the university is sponsoring the product. If we err on the side of making sure we are an identifiable asset to the university, we co-brand, if we err on the side of making sure we are seen as completely neutral, we refuse to co-brand. I personally feel that we need to make sure we are seen by the faculty, students, and particularly the administration as effective resources in the competition for faculty and students.

How can we speed up access to print resources? This can be a tough issue for some librarians. There seems to be a feeling that "spoon feeding" or otherwise making it too

easy for students to obtain information is bad for them. This has eased over the years with the advent of computers with which email messages, for example, can be used to advise students when a recall or an interlibrary loan is ready to pick up. But there still remains a conviction that everyone needs to work for what they get. The only problem is, we are not the only game in town. The Internet has contributed to the culture of immediate gratification. Our speed of delivery, whether the measure is the amount of time it takes to find a book, to obtain something through interlibrary loan, etc., are all compared with the speed of the Web.

What should we do? I think we need to begin by saying, let's make it as easy to get printed books and journal articles as it is to get information from the Web. If we start with this goal in mind, we will make great improvements. If we begin defensively, we'll probably find ourselves where we are now—losing market share. As librarians we are all too capable of spouting the story of why buggy whip makers became nearly extinct—they failed to realize they were in the transportation business. Yet, we are all too unwilling to change our traditional services. We must.

How can we make our libraries more group friendly? This is another tough one. I'll wager that typical responses will be: we already have plenty of group study rooms, the administration has been unwilling to give us the necessary renovation funding, or we don't have any room. Great reasons. And if you have more than 75% of your user community in your library on an average day—believe them. On the other hand, if you have less than 15%, think again. Conditions in each library are so different I can't make many suggestions, but one could consider having group study reading rooms and let students sign up for study tables just like they sign up for rooms. Or, the library could take the initiative of getting others involved, e.g., the cafeteria could sponsor group study areas and let students sign up for tables.

I suggest that we all make a New Year's goal of figuring out how to double the number of faculty and students who use our libraries. The short and long term benefits will prove enormous.

*Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development Experts Meeting on Libraries and Resource Centers for Tertiary Education by the Programme on Educational Building and the Programme for Institutional Management in Higher Education. Paris, 9-10 March 1998. <http://www.oecd.org/els/pdfs/PEB/WFINALE.pdf> (Note: this opens in Netscape easily.)