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ATG Interviews Donald Beagle

Director of Library Services, Belmont Abbey College, Belmont, N.C.

by **Barbara Tierney** (Associate Professor and Information Commons Desk Coordinator, University of North Carolina, Charlotte; Phone: 704-687-3098) <bgtierne@email.uncc.edu>

ATG: Hey Don! You have come a long way since you were Head of the Main Library at Charleston County Library. Please tell us about yourself. What have you been doing?

DB: I joined the faculty of **Belmont Abbey College** (Belmont, N.C.) in 2000 as Director of Library Services. Previously, I had served as Head of the Information Commons and as Associate University Librarian at the **University of North Carolina, Charlotte**. Before that, I had spent fifteen years in public library management positions, most recently as Regional Branch Head and then Head of Main Library with the **Charleston County Public Library** in Charleston, South Carolina.

ATG: You have had a long and distinguished career. Where did you do your graduate work? And didn't you win an award or two if my memory serves me right?

DB: I did graduate work at the **University of Michigan** where I won the **Hopwood Writing Award** (1977). A few years later I was also the first recipient of **NCLA's Doralyn J. Hickey Award** for my first article about library technology. ("Decision Points in Small-Scale Automation." *North Carolina Libraries*, 44(3) Fall 1986. 159-169).

ATG: And of course your articles include "Conceptualizing an Information Commons" (*Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 25(2) March 1999, 82-89.) which Paul Conway, formerly with Duke University and now with the University of Michigan, has called "...the seminal article that defined the core requirements of an Information Commons." Much of your writing has come from your role as head of the IC at UNC-Charlotte. Why did you move from a large university like UNCC to small Belmont Abbey College? And why should collection development, acquisitions and serials librarians be interested?

DB: Well, in the digital era, for me at least, some of the cache has drained out of the large library mystique. Through FTE-based sliding scales and consortium licensing, small libraries can loom a good deal "larger" in the digital domain than they ever could in the realm of print collections. This 1950's era building I work in was sort of an ugly duckling to visiting colleagues, but I saw it differently. I realized that it could become a better environment for enabling student use of technology than for shelving a large print collection. Since we see a trend toward offsite storage, compact shelving, downsized in-house collections and so forth, I felt that this type of building had unrealized potential. I might add, when the *Chronicle of Higher Education* sent a reporter and an architect around the state to review historic



Donald Beagle (far left) after his lecture at *Deutscher Bibliothekartag* in Düsseldorf. Also pictured left to right: **Holly Murten**, Information Resources Officer of the U.S. Mission to Germany; **Brigitte Tabertshofer**, Information Resource Center Director, Amerika Haus Cologne; **Dr. Uwe Kersting**; and **Jens Lazarus**, of *Universitätsbibliothek Leipzig*. Photograph by **Christine Gläser** of Carl von Ossietzky Universität Oldenburg.

campuses in North Carolina, they were quite taken with this library building. Their comments in the *Chronicle* article mentioned things like the windows and the front porch area, but their observations during their campus visit went well beyond that. Regarding collection development, my sense is that the not-too-distant future might bring more development of shared collection storage facilities among small colleges within metro areas, and possibly more widespread use of collaborative collection development.

ATG: Did the new Belmont Abbey position bring any surprises?

DB: I discovered opportunities to do some research I had only dreamed about at UNCC, but in an environment where stronger ratios allow sharper differentiation of impacts. What I mean by this is that a small college can enjoy a higher ratio of staff to FTE and workstations to FTE than can a large university. In fact, I think we rank 3rd or 4th among private colleges in North Carolina by those measures. That means that the impact of a new service delivery model can be measured more quickly and definitively because those ratios can throw the impact into sharper relief. The **Scholastica Project**, which applied an XML-based knowledge visualization schema to an experimental OPAC, was conducted entirely at **Belmont Abbey College**, and resulted in a D-LIB article that still draws a good deal of attention. ("Visualizing Keyword Distribution Across Multidisciplinary C-Space," *D-Lib*, 9(6) June 2003. Available at: <http://www.dlib.org/dlib/june03/beagle/06beagle.html>) I think having more workstations and staff per FTE translated into more immediately measurable impacts for that project on its internal community of users than would have been the case at UNCC. Of course, ironically, now the **Charlotte Research Institute** at UNCC is getting into knowledge visualization research.

ATG: And you liked the Belmont Abbey setting?

DB: What also impressed me about **Belmont Abbey** was its sense of collegiality and community. Some people think collegiality is mere froth on the surface of professionalism, and easily disregarded. I disagree. Collegiality is the *foundation* of service delivery; the equivalent of "Librarianship 101." If you as a librarian are not committed to courtesy toward all faculty and students, and to collegiality toward your colleagues, even those who disagree with you, then don't waste my time by applying for a job where I am director, because you won't last long anyway. That sense of community also interests me from the point of view of communities of learning and scholarship. **Belmont Abbey** is a functioning monastery, as well as a college. Benedictine monasteries have a fascinating history, as **Peter Burke** comments in his book, *A Social History of Knowledge*. **Burke** points out that Benedictine abbeys were pioneering the notion of learning communities and collaborative scholarship *a full millennium* before the development of printing. So that brings a unique perspective to this time we now live in, when two great, long-term eras called the "Age of Print" and the "Digital Age," are grinding against each other like huge tectonic plates.

ATG: So, this has led to *The Information Commons Handbook*?

DB: Yes. *The IC Handbook* explores the ongoing conversion of traditional libraries into innovative environments for learning, research, and instructional support. *The Information Commons* is an umbrella concept describing the physical, virtual, and cultural environment for new learning communities of students, teachers, scholars, and researchers. As a new model for service delivery, it is not about technology per se, but how an organization reshapes itself around people using technology in pursuit of learning.

In the Foreword of *The Information Commons Handbook*, **Stephen Abram** (Vice President, Innovation, **SirsiDynix** and President, **Special Libraries Association**) states:

"This is the right book at the right time....The evolution of libraries is at a tipping point. Librarians can either continue on the path of technocracy or debate and implement the next generation of libraries in a new way that combines the best of past traditions with the opportunities presented by new technologies reimagined in the service of society."

ATG: What kind of impact is *The IC*
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Handbook having? Can you tell at this point?

DB: Yes. *The IC Handbook* is making an impact. Three longtime IC managers have emailed to say they plan to use it in upcoming presentations, and one already has. That's the toughest audience I could hope to reach. It has also been mentioned in three or four high-profile blogs, such as **Lorcan Dempsey's** blog at **OCLC**, and of course the reviews in *Library Journal*, *American Libraries*, and *Booklist* were very positive. Mention of it has popped up in the **EDUCAUSE Learning Spaces** listserve, and at their "This is not a Lab" Webcenter on learning space design. I was a bit surprised, but still very pleased, by the number of medical school libraries listing it in **WorldCat** within four or five months after publication. I had not anticipated such immediate interest from that segment of the library community. Mainly I'm delighted that it is reaching small community colleges in Kentucky even while it has been picked up by large research universities like **Harvard** and **Oxford**. I guess being the first published monograph on this topic gave it an extra nudge.

ATG: How do you envision the role of an "IC Librarian" (with regard to academic faculty, students) five years down the road? And how about the Collection Development librarian?

DB: That depends on whether the Commons "subsumes" the library, and the library comes to be viewed as the subsidiary unit within a larger Commons organization. In the forthcoming *Information Commons Case Studies* book, one IC manager has stated:

"The success of the IC affects the design and use of the library as a whole. For example, the library reference area was redesigned to reflect the openness and fluidity of the IC. Instead of hosting the IC, the library ends up being subsumed by it. The IC melds over time with the rest of the library and comes to characterize the entire building."

Currently, the typical job ad you see has a Library Director advertising for a "Head of the InfoCommons."

We might someday see the roles reversed, and the Director of the InfoCommons advertising for a subordinate titled "Head of the Library," or "Manager of the Print Collection." Partly I suspect this will depend on how ongoing use of the book collection shakes out as **Google Book Search** slowly builds its content database. I personally think we are still in the period where the "Age of Print" overlaps the "Digital Era." Books are still very much with us, and properly so, which means that the traditional role of the library

as "parent" organization to the Commons will continue for at least awhile, and possibly for decades. But we are obviously living in a time when major shifts can occur with unexpected speed. In the *Handbook*, I explore "divergence branding," where the IC is branded as a distinctive "storefront" within the library's general physical enclosure, or as a separate structure. As part of its divergent branding, I recommend programming oriented toward scanning-the-horizon activities and presentations, so that the IC comes to be viewed as future-oriented, rather than muddled with the library's identity as being oriented toward preservation of the past. When this branding strategy is adopted, it further impacts the role of "IC Librarian" and hopefully promotes more collaboration between the IC Librarian and

"...[T]wo great, long-term eras called the Age of Print and the Digital Age are grinding against each other like huge tectonic plates."

faculty early-adopters who may participate in horizon-scanning programs and projects. As to collection development librarians, I think while divergence branding is helpful, it is also crucial NOT to position the IC in a way that seems to devalue or disenfranchise the book collection. In my presentations, I use a photo of one IC (**University of Chicago**) where you

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see piles of books scattered around the IC workstations, and you see students using those books. The next wave of Commons redesign may bring new ways to re-introduce shelving clusters that bring small core collections back into the Commons workspace. And of course, future use of books in the Commons will also be impacted by **Google Book Search**.

ATG: *Is Google Book Search going to have the huge impact on scholarship that some are predicting?*

DB: If it survives legal challenges, and I suspect that some accommodations will be worked out, and also improves quality control, then it could have a massive impact on those areas of traditional scholarship that have relied on huge print collections spanning the past few centuries: historical research, literary studies, and so forth. I have just finished co-authoring a new book on the **Civil War** poet **Abram Ryan**, *Poet of the Lost Cause*, to be published by **University of Tennessee Press** late this year or early next. We made major discoveries in researching **Ryan** by way of **Google Book Search** and other fulltext databases like *Documenting the American South*. In fact, those database discoveries are a key factor that sets our book apart from the earlier academic biography of **Ryan**, *Furl That Banner*, by **David O'Connell**. Let me give you just one example that hints at the huge potential of **Google Book Search**.

In his book, **O'Connell** cites a 1950's biography of **Beauregard** that claims the general gave a speech with **Ryan** in Nashville in February 1862. **O'Connell** dismissed this as a myth, because that **Beauregard** biography offered no solid documentation to back up the claim, and **O'Connell** found no other sources mentioning that speech. But when I did a **Boolean** search on **RYAN** and **NASHVILLE**, up popped another account of this speech, by an eyewitness no less, named **Julia Morgan**. **Morgan's** description of this speech was buried in a book first published in 1896, decades before the biography of **Beauregard** was written. **Julia Morgan's** account had remained undiscovered by **Ryan** researchers, including **O'Connell**, simply because her book was never indexed! It took a tool like **Google Book Search** to unearth her account. Then a month or so later, up popped yet another account of the **Ryan-Beauregard** speech in a book by **Robert Selph Henry**, also published decades before the **Beauregard** biography. **Henry's** book had been indexed, but very poorly, so that **Ryan's** name never appeared in the index. So in this example we see where one significant historical event — a public event, no less, on a stage in a major southern city during wartime — was virtually lost to history because the first book to mention it was never indexed and the

second was poorly indexed. So even in its current embryonic, imperfect state, **Google Book Search** helped to uncover this lost bit of American history.

ATG: *You mentioned the problem of quality control. Did you see other weaknesses in Google Book Search? Do you expect it to continue to improve?*

DB: Yes. The **Ryan** research also revealed some other current weaknesses in **Google Book Search** beyond quality control issues. The copyright restrictions cause much content to be available only in "snippets," rather than as fullpage text excerpts. This can become incredibly maddening. In one case, a snippet stated: "Ryan caused a sensation at the banquet when he stood up and..." And WHAT? End of snippet! Because the source was an old bound journal not available on ILL, I then had to drive 150 miles to a library that held that journal, just to see whether this "sensational" incident was worthy of consideration for our book. My gas money and car mileage obviously didn't help the copyright owner one iota. I should not have to drive a hundred miles, or buy an entire old volume from an out-of-print dealer, neither of which helps the copyright owner, to read three more sentences about what **Ryan** said at that banquet that caused such a sensation. If we are going to enforce copyright under the notion that the financial interest of creators should be protected, then we need a rational mechanism for enabling proportional compensation. I would suggest the idea of what I call a "snippet jukebox." Next to each snippet, **Google** could place a clickable payment button at some prorated level, say a penny a paragraph, or ten cents a page, that would allow a researcher to extend a snippet or specify a custom chunk of text for purchase and downloading. Monies flowing from the snippet jukebox could then actually go to copyright holders, not to **Alibris** or the local **Qwik Mart** gas station. In some ways, it would be a solution that parallels the resolution of **Napster** music downloading. By the way, there are tricky little ways to tweak a search so as to enlarge or extend a snippet, but I did not realize this at the time. And in any case, my point about the snippet jukebox is still valid because those searching tricks might be dis-enabled by **Google** as they refine their interface. I have run into some of the copyright protection mechanisms **OCLC** has placed in the **NetLibrary** eBook collection and they seem applicable to the issue of snippet expansion. While they're certainly not perfect, they may point the way toward some future accommodations that might be worked out for **Google Book Search**.

ATG: *Time for predictions? What will the "next big thing" be (technologically) for ICs and/or libraries?*

DB: I'm really taken with the **RENCI DisplayWall** at **UNC-Chapel Hill's Health Sciences Library**. Its capabilities turn out to

be very congruent with the multifaceted roles of a Learning Commons. It has the physical scope to enable review of broad patterns and wide-ranging phenomena, and yet the power of high-definition resolution to probe small elements of detail within those patterns. I think it has the potential to be an extraordinary tool for group process learning. Plus when combined with the **AccessGrid** for virtual realtime conferencing, it introduces the aspect of extended communities of learning. Counter-balancing this very large chunk of technology, of course, will be greater power and capabilities for small handheld devices.

ATG: *How do you think collection development will change?*

DB: Well, for sake of argument, let's assume **Google Book Search** really does establish itself as a well-configured and pervasive research tool. I suspect one side-effect of having a lot of faculty routinely doing fulltext keyword searches across massive monograph collections like **Princeton's** and **Michigan's** will be that the once-tidy concept of disciplines or subject areas will be further eroded. Or maybe "exploded" is the better word! There is still a tendency to think of bounded areas called disciplines, and grey margins between them as "interdisciplinary studies." But my fulltext keyword searches on topics related to the **Ryan** project took me routinely into texts classified beyond areas like history or literature, and into economics, ethnic studies, folk music, geography, and so forth. It may move us away from collections built around disciplines and toward what **Foucault** called "discursive formations," where there are no true boundaries, but endless arrays of interconnected textual tributaries traceable by citation-chains. I may not be able to articulate this well, but large discipline-based collections have always seemed to me to be *prescriptive*: they tend to present the titles that a disciplinary specialist asserts that a collection on subject X should have. We may see more *descriptive* collection development in ways that positions the print collection as a contextual frame and deep structure undergirding the more exploratory and experimental realm of digital scholarship, and as a result, there may need to be a sort of ongoing dialectic between print and digital gatekeepers.

ATG: *What about The Commons/library as an arena for combined academic-social activities? Social Networking in the Commons?*

DB: In my recent consulting visit to a university in New England, I made a presentation to a group of institutional Vice Presidents, and a comment was made about my reference to comfortable chairs in a Learning Commons. For a prospective grant proposal, this person asked, could this be restated as something like "conversation ergonomics?" Actually, this was a great question that goes beyond writing an impressive-sounding grant proposal. The area of conversational and social ergonomics is related to a small but growing body of research literature. One thread of this research came out of studies of students (usually younger than college age) visiting museums with

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The Information Commons Handbook, by **Donald Robert Beagle** with contributions by **Donald Russell Bailey** and **Barbara Tierney**. Published by **Neal-Schuman Publishers, Inc.**, N.Y., N.Y. 1-55570-562-6. 2006. Book and CD-ROM. 247 pp.

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their families, and the role that parent-child conversations, and peer-to-peer conversations among the students, play in learning within the museum environment. Whereas museums tend to have semi-permanent physical exhibits, the Learning Commons can be used (by faculty) as a constantly changing quasi-museum, with virtual exhibits stored in large classified learning object repositories, and called up on multimedia platforms by students individually or in small groups, with the specific goal of prompting thematic learning conversations among the students. And to return to your previous question, the **DisplayWall** would be an idea tool for group access to multimedia learning objects. Many researchers implicitly anticipate, accept, and welcome a socializing component to these learning conversations, which illustrate the importance of space ergonomics and seating for making this possible.

ATG: Can you tell us about the forthcoming "Information Commons Case Studies" ALA Editions (January 2008)? What will this include? What sorts of case studies? How many? And any collection development applications?

DB: The forthcoming ALA Editions book by my colleagues **Russ Bailey** (Library Director, Providence College) and **Barbara Tierney** (Information Commons Desk Coordinator, UNC Charlotte) will include 20 IC case studies from both small academic libraries (Dickinson, Carleton, Champlain, Abilene Christian, Asbury Theological, and St. Petersburg) and large (U. of Arizona, SUNY Binghamton, Brigham Young, U. of Calgary, Calif. Polytechnic, U. of Georgia, U. of Guelph, Indiana U. Bloomington, U. of Mass. Amherst, U. of Minn. Twin Cities, UNC Charlotte, U. of So. Calif., Univ. of So. Maine, and U. of Victoria).

Emphasis will be placed on the "lessons learned" of these academic ICs (in the areas of design, equipment, services, etc.) as they plan their second iterations.

With regard to "collection development lessons learned," we are seeing that many of these libraries wish to expand their electronic collections and reduce the size of their print reference collections.

ATG: Tell us a bit about yourself. What do you like to do? What do you read? Family? Last book read?

DB: Writing is my first love. I enjoyed researching and writing the **Ryan** biography more than any other project I've ever undertaken. Having it reviewed by the Editorial Board at **UT Press** was also nerve-wracking, however, because I've never been a **Civil War** scholar. But to write **Ryan's** story as an army chaplain I not only had to delve into **Civil War** history, but into Tennessee's war history, which was probably more tangled and convoluted than any other state. I also play the piano. Many years ago I rumbled through the **Chopin** preludes and etudes, but these days I mostly do **Bach** on a digital keyboard. My

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wife, **Meredith**, was formerly a cataloger at **UNC-Charlotte**. I have a daughter **Lucy**, from my first marriage, who is now on a two-year

teaching stint in Japan. We still visit friends in Charleston, frequently, and also spend times with relatives in the Virginia mountains. 🌲

Rumors.

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of **State University of New York College at Cortland**, where he earned a degree in Accounting and Finance. He also holds a degree in Computer Sciences from **CPI**.
www.hwwilson.com

Was talking briefly to the pistol **John**

McDonald <jmcdonald@library.caltech.edu>. **John** is on family leave at home with his new baby! Congratulations to him! In the library space, we were talking about **John's Statistics Preconference** which he is not doing this year. But **John** says he is planning to be in **Charleston**. He hasn't missed a Charleston since 1997! And I'll bet he'll be speaking to us about something interesting!

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