2014

Back Talk: Is It Time to Hitch the Academic Library's Wagon to Online Education?

Tony Ferguson
NYU's Shanghai Campus, awf2@nyu.edu

lections of letters and memorabilia that have family significance, but have never been identified or shared with the public. As a growing culture of technology users opens the pathway for materials to be shared, and as the public demand for access develops, then I believe more and more individuals will be interested in sharing treasures that they hold."

Below is a transcribed letter from the Sleeper Collection provided by Asbury University, Archives & Special Collections.
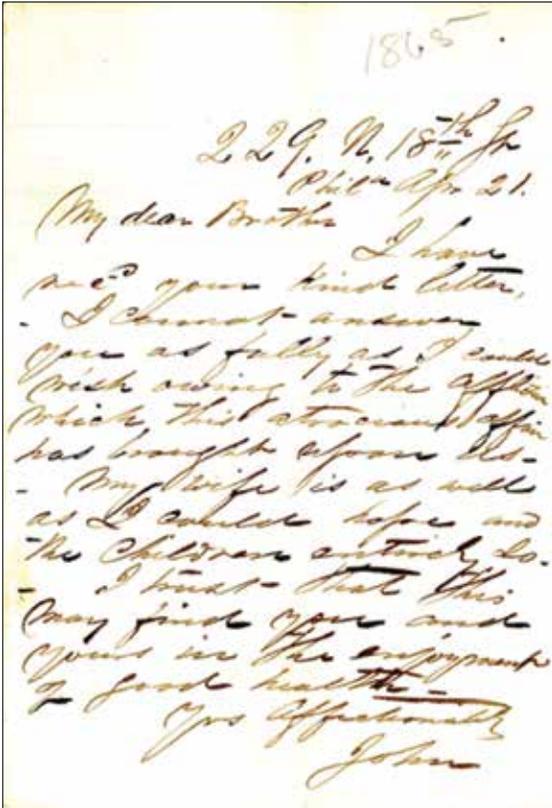
Sleeper Family Collection — KLA 2014 Joint Spring Conference — Session: "Bringing Hidden Treasures into the Light: Discovering Civil War Letters in an Archives Backlog." Presenter: **Ruth Slagle**, Class of 2014, History Major, **Asbury University** — Letter 1 April 21 (image owned by Asbury University Archives).

Transcription of Letter

229. N, 18th St

Phila Apr 21.

My dear Brother

I have recd (received) your kind letter, I cannot answer you as fully as I could wish owing to the affliction which this atrocious affair has brought upon us – My wife is as well as I could hope and the children entirely so. I trust that this may find you and yours in the enjoyment of good health –

Yours affectionately

John

Ruth Slagle explains: This letter holds significance because it was written to **George W. Sleeper** from his brother, **John S. Clarke**, a week after **Lincoln** had been shot. **John Wilkes Booth** was **John S. Clarke's** brother-in-law. This letter shows that **John S. Clarke** wanted to let **George** know that his family was doing relatively well following the circumstances, telling him that the children were fine as well. **Asia**, his wife and **Wilkes'** sister, was doing as well as he could expect following the shock **Asia** had just experienced since she was 6-7 months pregnant. Such a shock could have easily induced labor. To me the letter shows that family connections are stronger especially in times of dire straits. **John S. Clarke** wrote this on the same day that **John Wilkes Booth's** letter to the nation was published in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. I hold **Asia** in high esteem because of her tenacious courage in facing life. She wrote the memoir *The Unlocked Book* about her brother **John Wilkes Booth** completely in secret. 🌿

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discouraging, it was also found that once students found the library and its resources, they discovered that they were quite useful (Upon reflection, based upon my own experiences over the past nearly 50 years, I don't think much has changed in this regard. It seemed that for most students, it was only by the time they got to their junior or senior years that they discovered what the library had to offer and how to use these resources to varying degrees of effectiveness).

Chapter Five summarizes what has been learned in the earlier parts of the report and notes that "Confidence [in the value of online education], easy-to-use Web platforms, the ubiquity of mobile devices, and the steep cost of higher education are fueling consumers' appetites for more convenient, more cost-effective education options." The question for all of us is, what has all of this to do with libraries?

The final, sixth chapter is a sort of survival manual. What should libraries be doing to survive in this new environment? Basically, based upon my reading of this chapter, I think what we need to be doing can be boiled down to three things:

1. Analyze and determine the *immediate* needs of your hybrid and full-time online students. Online education is different, don't try to get away with simply adapting our print world solutions to the problems of the online world. Page 90 in the report provides a useful beginning list of what online learners want from a library.
2. On the basis of this analysis, decide what services/resources need to be provided, but make sure they are *convenient, immediate and personalized*. This is what students like about online education. They can watch lectures when they want and as many times as they want. Readings are one click away; we can't expect online students to embrace the old time-consuming practices of the past. These students need immediate help, not MWF from 2-3 PM. They may drive their teachers crazy with emails at all hours of the day and night, but that is part of their world.
3. *Advertise* these services: Out of sight is out of mind — that is our problem: we are too often overlooked or ignored.

I don't think we want to entirely give up our physical collections, the availability of quiet study areas for those who treasure these places of refuge, and we don't need food everywhere, but as the nature of the educational institutions we serve change, we must change as well and we don't want to be dragged into this new work kicking and protesting. I love instant gratification. Libraries need to embrace this new goal whenever possible. 🌿

Back Talk — Is it Time to Hitch the Academic Library's Wagon to Online Education?

Column Editor: **Anthony (Tony) W. Ferguson** (Interim Library Director, NYU's Shanghai Campus)
<awf2@nyu.edu>

I assume many of you have already taken steps to make your library a much more friendly place for students to get their work done, e.g., food, separate noisy and silent study areas, larger individual laptop/study desks for graduate students, comfy chairs and couches, Friday night TV events, and you are open 24/7 or some such schedule, etc. But is it time to simply give up on the brick and mortar library and go with the virtual library for the virtual students?

OCLC has a new report out that is well worth the time needed to read its 106 pages on developments in online education and their impact on academic libraries: "At a Tipping Point: Education, Learning and Libraries: A Report to the Membership" (*oclc.org/en-US/news/releases/2014/201422dublin.html*). This report doesn't give you all the answers, but it will help everyone interested in improving their libraries get a better handle on what the problems are so that librarians can figure out what they want to do at their locations.

The report begins with the undeniable fact that access to the Internet/electronic information now dominates our everyday lives. This is certainly true for me: I am now writing this essay on a tablet connected to the Web; but earlier this morning, after staggering out of bed — up too late watching "Call the Midwife" using my **Apple TV**, I checked my email and Facebook page so I could see pictures of grandchild 19 born yesterday; I then checked the online news application Haystack to see what was happening in the world; and finally as I walked around the small lake in our community, I kept track of how many of those fishing were also reading email or surfing the Web while they were waiting for a bite (90% — but one man was actually doing a newspaper crossword puzzle). Interestingly, six months ago when in Shanghai I found that about 90 percent of all subway riders were likewise reading email, watching TV on their smartphones, or surfing the Web while waiting for their stops.

But the central point in the "At the Tipping Point" report is, just as the Internet now dominates how we obtain the informal facts and figures needed for everyday life, how we shop for daily needs, and how we communicate with family, friends, colleagues and clients, we have now reached the tipping point ("that magic moment when an idea, trend, or social behavior crosses a threshold, tips and spreads like wildfire," **Malcolm Gladwell**, *gladwell.com/the-tipping-point/*) where the Internet will also dominate the ways in which we and our children receive our formal educations.

This report is full of facts and figures taken from a wide range of other articles and surveys about developments in education and how libraries are now being used. Chapter One focuses on what it is about online education that argues that we are at the tipping point of changing from traditional to online education. Basically, three points are made: online learners are satisfied because they like the flexibility and convenience of online education; parents who are paying the bills are positive about it in hopes that it will save them money; and students who are funding their own educations are also happy to save some money.

The report does not completely ignore the downsides of online education: the lack of interaction with other students and teachers and the need for so much self-discipline. My own view is that the problem with online education is that it is not as fun as on-campus education. When I went off to college at age 18, I realized that I would have to go to some classes but it was the excitement of being on one's own, of having scores of opportunities for finding friends, etc., that made going to college so attractive. As stated in an article produced by an online university promotion group:

> "If you're looking for the traditional college experience of living in a dormitory, hanging out on a campus, and meeting dozens or hundreds of other undergraduate or graduate students socially, you won't get it at an online university. Online schools are totally focused on academics, and because you aren't living in close proximity with the other students in your classes, the likelihood of social relationships developing out of your school is basically nil." *bestonlineuniversities.com/5-advantages-of-online-universities-vs-traditional-universities/*

Chapter Two deals with the perceptions parents and students have about higher education that have created an opportunity for the growth of online education: Both students and their parents are doubtful that the value of a traditional on-campus education equals its cost. These costs have increased dramatically over the past ten years: a 40 percent increase, the total costs of an on-campus education over the past decade and a total student debt of 1.2 trillion dollars. This doesn't mean that parents and students don't want an on-campus education — it is just that most of them don't see it as affordable. It seems clear, therefore, that the growth of more affordable online only, or hybrid online educational programs are highly likely.

Chapters Three and Four swing the focus of the report to libraries in this changing environment. Chapter Three starts with a discussion of the library "brand." Studies have shown that when people are asked to say what comes first to their minds when they hear the word "library," they say "books." Libraries typically conjure up visions of buildings full of books that can be read in relative silence. Many people treasure libraries for these qualities, and for those still rooted in the print world, they will continue to value the book-centered library. But for the students and teachers who are operating via the Internet (online lectures, live chat rooms, reading materials presented via their laptops, etc.), such a library brand is of little worth. The question then becomes, as formal education changes from classroom based to Internet linked, what can libraries do to remain relevant? The answer seems to be that libraries need to change how they are viewed and they need to make sure that the services/resources they provide the student the next time she/he visits the library in person or virtually are relevant to their new Internet educational environment.

Among many other things, Chapter Four tries to describe what on-campus and online students want from their libraries. On-campus students now seem to value the library as a reliable place where the tools and resources needed to help them get their work done are available. Online students value and want access to library online content, tools for conducting research, and instruction on the use of online resources.

Perhaps one of the most important observations in this part of the report is that while the value of the library is not totally discounted, most undergraduate students don't immediately understand the need for libraries. While this is