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Back Talk — Library School: Is it Where You Get Your “Union Card” or is it, Like Youth, Wasted on the Young?

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Library School. Not sure what comes to your mind when you think of this compound noun. For me, it called to mind the concept of a union card. I will explain this later, but for now let me provide some background information.

I had attended one year, 1963-64, at **BYU** doing the usual freshman things: learning to do my own laundry; learning to cook Kraft Macaroni and Cheese for breakfast, lunch, and dinner; and relearning everything that I was supposed to have learned in high school (champion oxymoron). But then I went off to Taiwan for 30 months of living and learning. When I got back to the States, I returned to school and got a part-time library assistant job shelving books between classes and pretending to be a reference librarian a few evenings each week. Working in the library was great. Unlike the landscaping crew, I was sheltered from the elements, it was clean work, and the scheduling was forgiving so that I could work for a few hours, go to class, and then come back to earn my \$1.50 an hour. I subsequently continued to do all sorts of nonprofessional library jobs at two universities while finishing my BA and MA degrees focusing on Chinese politics. It was during graduate school that I began to get cold feet about finishing my PhD in political science. China had not yet opened. We were still fighting in Vietnam. America wanted to get out of Asia, and so the prospects of getting a China-focused position was doubtful.

It was at this juncture that I began looking around for some way to earn a living, since by that time I had a wife and son in addition to myself to support. I was then working in the **University of Washington's** undergraduate library as a part-timer doing all sorts of clerking and research tasks.



One day I mentioned to one of my bosses that I was rethinking my career goals. He said, “**Tony**, you seem to like working in libraries. Why don’t you become a librarian?” As we talked more, I learned that before I could become one I needed a library “Union Card,” or MLS degree.

The question then became how should I go about getting such a degree? I considered working on the MLS part-time along with a full-time job. This librarian, named **Jay**, said, “**Tony**, going to library school is like drinking a bowl full of vomit: you can sip it a mouthful at a time, or gulp it down as quickly as possible.” So, after making application to **UW's** championship library school, I stopped my political science studies on a Friday and took up Library Science on a Monday.

Actually, I found library school to be a lot of fun. **UW's** library school was full of largely brainy students and eccentric teachers, and most of the work could be done 9-5 pm, Monday through Friday. That left the evenings and weekends open to pretending I was a real reference librarian in the **UW** undergraduate library. Ten-and-a-half months later I was a card-carrying professional librarian. The card allowed me to take up all sorts of library jobs and learn all the important things critical to being successful but not mentioned in library school, like how to get along with the occasional idiot coworker, how to convince the students and faculty you were not an idiot, how to get more money for your budget, how to get donors to give the library money, how to fill out approval plan profiles, how to set up a reference desk hourly schedule, etc., etc.

For the next 35 or so years, when helping interview candidates for positions in the libraries where I worked, I just took for granted that they, like me,

would need a library science degree, or union card, to get a job. Once I began working in Hong Kong I took graduate library training even more for granted. But then about ten or so years ago I had two experiences that caused me to think about the library science degree once again: First, I was asked to go to central China to join a group of American and Chinese librarians to talk about the future of libraries and the education of those working in them. It was at this meeting that I became aware of the “iSchool” revolution that was taking place/had taken place in America and the degree to which the most famous library schools in China had followed suit. Second, when I later discussed this movement with a great library director at a Chinese university, he said that he was only too aware of the effects of this phenomena. But what was most interesting was his comment that while he felt out of loyalty that he should give new graduates from the library school from which he had graduated opportunities to work at his library, he found they made very problematic employees. The problem was they had not been sufficiently trained to work well in libraries. They couldn’t do reference work, they couldn’t work in technical services, they had no clue how to work with the faculty or how to build collections designed to meet the needs of students. Memories of this conversation have rolled around in my mind ever since. I wondered if the problem wasn’t the students but his library being too old-fashioned. But his library, like most other leading research libraries in China, was already “E” everything, and so I didn’t see how the library could be blamed.

Thinking about this caused me to look into the iSchool phenomena here in the U.S., and I have to admit I stand amazed at the changes that have taken place in library education since I was a student. In my day (1970-71) I had quite a bit of freedom on what to study. But compared to what today’s students can do, my experience was quite different. I took one LC and two Dewey cataloguing courses; a series of social science, humanities, and science bibliography courses; a “computer and libraries” course where we learned that computers and serials would never mix; a collection development seminar taught by the library director; and a few other courses just in case my first job dealt with one of those specialities.

Space considerations here won’t allow me to share everything I have learned about iSchools. I began by looking at the *U.S. News and World Report* article that ranks all sorts of graduate programs including library science. (<http://grad-schools.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-graduate-schools/top-library-information-science-programs/library-information-science-rankings>) After a review of many of the schools mentioned in

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this report, I came away with a whole new set of new thoughts about today's iSchool style of library science training.

My first thought was, looking at the curriculum of the iSchool receiving the highest ranking, the **University of Illinois**, I can understand why some libraries might find it hard to find graduates fit for the entry-level positions they were offering. Indeed, unless students were carefully counseled to focus on the few traditional services offered at most libraries, the very richness of the courses available to these students might render them fairly useless. For example, at Illinois, I found a list of 186 courses taught on campus that master's degree students could attend. But that wasn't all. I found they could also choose from another 63 WISE (Web-based Information Science Education) courses being taught at other iSchools.

My second thought or conclusion was that most of the nearly 250 courses available for study looked to be of great value. Initially, as I went through the course listing I thought I might find all sorts of technogobbledygook classes but that wasn't the case at all.

But this discovery led me to my third, and perhaps final, thought about iSchools. It can be best expressed by twisting **George Bernard Shaw's** oft-quoted dictum about the value of youth: "Youth is wasted on the young." In my case, after reviewing the broad variety of courses dealing with the problems faced by today's libraries, I fear today's iSchool courses are probably being wasted on new librarians. Our profession needs to find a way to enable established librarians to take these courses. I am optimistic that this can happen.

By the way, this is my final **Back Talk** column. I personally have loved working in libraries. There have been ups and downs, but overall it has been a great experience. Now, however, I have decided to focus my energies elsewhere. Of course, I may get coerced by **Katina** to write something else from time to time or to attend the **Charleston Conference**, and if so, I'll see you in Charleston or on the pages of **ATG**. 🌍

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anywhere from five to seven years. That means that a \$10K sale to a University library usually translates into \$50-\$70K projection over a five-to seven-year time period because cancellations usually occur after a few years, if at all.

Therefore, vendors selling subscription-based products to libraries are usually willing to be receptive to granting discounts (when asked) because they know once the product is in the library, that it will probably be there for another five to seven years so that any initial discount is more than made up for in the later years of the subscriptions' life cycle. If it's a renewal discussion and the vendor is coming in with a five-percent price increase over last year, it would be hard to believe that the vendor would walk away from a signed order if the library proposed a one-percent or a two-and-a-half-percent price increases instead of the original price submission. Moreover, a vendor seeking to displace the competitors' product may be willing to grant a large discount to gain a foothold into the library.

A vendor is in business to satisfy the customers by providing a high level of service with relevant products at a reasonable price. Quite frankly, the vendor may balk at the library's initial counter offer, but in the end, the vendor is there to do business and most of the time will not reject a reasonable counter offer.

All of which brings us to the concept of leverage. It's no secret that library budgets are shrinking, and with that reality the library must be judicious in their selection of materials for their users. Aside from vendors with sole source offerings, the fact is that in a competitive environment, two or three vendors will have similar content in their databases. Sure, one vendors' offerings may be better than the others, but that does not stop the library from suggesting that they believe that a better price for similar content may be obtained at the vendors' arch competitor. Just sayin'...

Another example of leverage involves the payment of the product that probably will be the selected. Given that funds for library purchases are in short supply, perhaps an extended payment plan might be accepted by the vendor. Or maybe a negotiated cap on future price increases over the next three years of the life of the product may be an item placed for consideration on the table. Sometimes vendors will accept a 15-month subscription for the price of 12 months.

It is a fact that in the world of libraries, vendors are continually developing better databases for their customers. Not a year goes by without a slew of vendors announcing new and better databases for sale. Having been involved in many new product introductions, it would not be outside the realm of possibility to say that sometimes those new products combined with new platforms may not work as well as advertised, much to the chagrin of the vendors. In such cases as a vendor wanting the library to buy

something new, the concept of making the library a beta site for three to six months at a nominal cost so as to test out the new offering may be met with approval since the vendor wants to get that new product in as many libraries as possible. Both sides prosper in this type of arrangement.

Libraries and vendors are in business together. It makes perfect sense for both sides to respect one another, be prepared, and understand the landscape in which the goal is to create a "win-win" outcome for both. 🌍

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