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 oxyronor). 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 small in addition to myself to support. I was then working at 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 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 really learning what it took to get a degree in Library Science. 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, 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 cataloging 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 specialties.

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](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 technobabbleyook 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 Barnard 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.