You Want Me to Do...WHAT???
Information Competencies for Librarians

Co-sponsored by CARL-South and the UCLA Library Instructional Services Advisory Committee

Over 65 people came to UCLA on October 17th to hear several well-known speakers present their ideas on how librarians can best prepare for the future while assessing their current career path and exploring future growth opportunities. Co-sponsored by CARL-South's program committee and the UCLA Library's Instructional Services Advisory Committee, the event drew librarians from all types of academic institutions in southern California.

Roy Tennant, Project Manager for Digital Library Research & Development at UC Berkeley, set the tone of the day with an intriguing presentation entitled "How to Become a 21st Century Librarian." Proclaiming that there have been more changes in libraries in the last ten years than in the last 100, Tennant outlined a "12-step" program of attitudes and behaviors necessary for recognizing, understanding, and successfully adapting to a state of constant change.

In terms of attitudes, step 2: "Center Yourself," exhorts us to acknowledge our skills, abilities, and experience, and be confident in our ability to continue to meet new challenges. In other words, tell yourself that you will survive--after all, it's just your job! Tennant suggested that to anticipate where the changes are coming from, we should watch the so-called "change agents" (step 7), or people, organizations, and ideas that shape change. One way to do this is to follow the money by reading the business section of your daily newspaper, computer journals, and even computer product catalogs to see how things will play out in libraries. Tennant also reminded us that change agents also change. For example, Microsoft's 180-degree about-face on pushing the MSN (Microsoft Network) as a competitor to the Internet. Another one of Tennant's steps was #9: be decisive. Audience members seemed intrigued by his idea that we need to develop the cool brutality to stop doing some things so we can achieve others. Furthermore, his friendly warning to not expect your boss to tell you what you can stop doing was met with agreement from members of the audience. Apropos to this lively and thought-provoking presentation, Roy has generously reproduced his slides on the Web at

The next speaker was Anne Lipow, Director of Library Solutions Institute and Press. In her talk, "Staying Ahead When You’re Already Behind: How to Get Trained and Keep Up to Speed," Lipow considered four issues relevant to the quest for 21st century competencies for librarians. First, she examined the driving force behind seeking new competencies. Citing the increasing dominance of the Web, and the trend toward "leasing" electronic information in place of "owning," Lipow asserted that today’s library no longer has a monopoly on making available other people’s information. Therefore, traditional librarian jobs and library services are only one small piece of the information profession. As we approach the 21st century, several new jobs are emerging: Webmaster, digital library coordinator, and personal information consultant, for example. New service concepts are also emerging from this environment, such as tiered reference, and partnerships between libraries and computing centers.

Second, Lipow outlined the personality characteristics that thrive today, which reinforced Roy Tennant’s 12-step plan. For example, Lipow noted that it’s OK to be comfortable not knowing it all; once you have figured out the competencies you are trying to achieve, look for partnerships. While acknowledging that dealing with change without any control over it can be difficult, she went on to urge librarians to be optimistic, approachable, and non-defensive toward change. Martin Seligman’s book, Learned Optimism: The Skill to Conquer Life's Obstacles, Large & Small (Random, 1991) was recommended. Thirdly, Internet-related skills, presentational and instructional design abilities, and marketing and needs assessment expertise were some of the categories of essential competencies that Lipow suggested. In addition, attitudes and behaviors to acquire and maintain skills and knowledge were presented, including a couple of motivational techniques. Two ways to make time for continuing education include "pretending" that CE is a requirement for your job, and blocking out time on your calendar as if you have a meeting but instead using the time to learn something new.

In summary, Scherrei encouraged the audience that the best way to grow professionally through self-assessment is to: (1) Choose your professional experiences in the context of your overall goals and learning style; (2) Don’t be afraid to reject some experiences, even though they are available to you; (3) Create a personal strategic plan by having a vision statement, goals, and objectives, and (4) Look for gaps in your education and decide which to fill.

The audience reassembled after lunch to hear from a distinguished panel of reactors. First up was Karen Flanders, Regional Manager, Advanced Information Management. She outlined the necessary competencies in the changing library environment. In addition to professional competencies in the areas of resources, access, technology, management, and research, she also recommended personal competencies. These include efficiency, good communication skills, a value-added nature, and self-confidence. Indeed, Flanders pointed out, librarians have an image problem in that we do not acknowledge or promote ourselves. We must present our ideas enthusiastically—not go quietly about our work and expect recognition. Furthermore, the 21st century librarian is someone who is a career strategist, who recognizes the need for continually updating and re-evaluating one’s career, and takes the initiative to keep growing. In order to develop these competencies, Flanders reinforced Rita Scherrei’s recommendation to perform a "self-search," or personal assessment to match your career path with your goals. This evaluative process must be ongoing, since change is ongoing. It is ironic, Flanders pointed out, that we usually spend more time planning for a vacation than we do for our professional lives.

The next reactor panelist was Gretchen Johnson, Associate Director, Information Programs, at CSU Long Beach. In listening to the other speakers, Gretchen defined these skills, competencies, personality traits, and experiences of the 21st century librarian as "values." Furthermore, she proclaimed that an unexamined "professional life" is not worth living. She also exhorted the audience to work to make these "values"
those of your colleagues, institution, and library. With that in mind, she then outlined a list of traits that one can use to determine if one is working for a 21st century library, which she cautioned, is based on her long association with the CSULB library.

First of all, ask if your library supports continuing education opportunities for all professional library staff, both librarian and non-library. Librarians at CSULB get 20 additional days off and $1,000 travel money per year. Examine your library’s strategic plan to see if concepts such as experimentation, risk, and innovation are stated. Does your management facilitate—rather than dictate—with money and resources and let the library staff decide how things should be done? Basically, Johnson suggested, does management give you the freedom to do things your own way, as long as the work gets done? So, Johnson asked, what do you do if you are not working for a 21st century library? Her suggestions ranged from the serious "move on," to the half-serious, "wait for people to die or retire," to redirecting yourself to an outside organization or inwardly to work on your own growth.

The final reactor panelist was John McGinnis, Dean of the Library at Cerritos College. In the spirit of the immortal words, "Be with caution bold," John proclaimed himself to not be a "techno-celibate," but not a "techno-gigolo" either. In arguing for balance between technology and traditional librarianship in this environment of change, John said that we need to embrace rebelliousness. Before we purposefully re-educate ourselves to be so-called "information competent," we need to realize that fundamental things have not changed. We may be too inclined to look forward without looking whence we came. Secondly, technology is not going to revolutionize education. Education still will involve thinking, conversing, and analyzing. Education is something that happens in the head—it is not just the consumption of greater amounts of information. The idea that there is a technological revolution in libraries and education creates dangers. It minimizes the importance of books, eliminates libraries, and promotes "entrepreneurial librarianship," whereby children, seniors, and low-income people will be denied access to information. In summary, McGinnis advised the audience, let’s try not to get too far away from the fundamental mission of libraries, which is to educate.

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