Libraries in the New Millennium

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Several recent conferences I attended really stirred my thinking about the current state of the library profession. The news I hear has not always been good, but it has been thought-provoking, so I hope you’ll indulge my sharing these thoughts with you. My hope is that by sharing my ideas, you will be persuaded to ponder more deeply some of the decisions we seem to make so easily, without thinking of the longer-term implications.

Among the speakers at the CARL (California Association of Research Libraries) Annual Conference held at the Asilomar in Monterey, was Michael Gorman, Dean of the Library at California State University, Fresno. Dr. Gorman has made no secret of his grave concerns about the terrible state of library education. His concerns about the dropping of the “L” word were well taken and thoughtful. Too many graduate library school programs not only have lost the word library from their names, but also the focus on librarians as keepers, preservers, and organizers of information. Programs have taken to teaching information science in place of traditional librarianship. Too often the lure and ease of access of digital information has not been tempered with sufficient concern about continuing accessibility after the data gets old and needs to be stored and preserved forever. Gorman reminded the audience that unless you’ve kept an older computer in stock, accessing older files stored on 5-1/4 floppy disks is impossible.

Gorman believes the only effective way today to ensure that digital information receives permanent storage is if a library prints this information out on acid-free paper and then catalogs and preserves it on the shelves. One example he gave I know holds true for my library. We’ve abandoned print telephone books in favor of easier and improved electronic counterparts such as switchboard.com [http://www.switchboard.com]. Telephone books were difficult to keep up-to-date and were increasingly costly for outlying areas, not to mention major consumers of space. Now that we don’t keep old telephone books, or keep then only in CD-ROM or online formats, what are the implications for historians, researchers, and genealogists trying to conduct research in the future about historical figures or family members?

Gorman reminds us that librarians must continue to be vigilant. If we do not preserve electronic materials and the technologies that can read them, future generations will not find the information or find it in a usable format. Instead of being at the dawn of the information age, we may well be at the dawn of the digital dark ages.

Much of the computer and electronic information of the past cannot be used today because it can’t be retrieved. If you doubt this, think back to those materials stored on microcard and ask yourself where the microcard reader is now, or where you could find a computer with a 5-1/4-inch floppy drive to read files you carefully backed-up just 9 years ago. We as librarians need to think long and hard about the future accessibility of digital documents. When it’s so easy to put documents online, it’s just as easy to toss them away. Several weeks after Michael Gorman’s presentation, I heard Jeff Rothenberg of the RAND Corporation speak. Rothenberg is probably most well known for his statement, “Digital information lasts forever or 5 years, whichever comes first.”

The “L” with IT

But back to the problem of library education. Michael Gorman is not the first person I’ve heard express concerns about the name and curriculum changes at what used to be graduate library schools. The University of California at Berkeley and the University of California at Los Angeles have both undergone name changes in the last couple of years and dropped the “L” word from their names. UC Berkeley has publicly declared its intention not to seek accreditation from the American Library Association. The School’s new name is the School of Information Management and Systems. According to the School’s Mission Statement:

The information revolution has created the need for a new kind of professional: someone who is skilled in locating, organizing, manipulating, filtering and presenting information. The mission of the School of Information Management and Systems is to educate such information managers.

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Information managers must be familiar with the technology used to store, organize and retrieve information in business, government, libraries and academic settings. However, technical expertise alone is not sufficient for success; SIMS graduates will be expected not only to manage technology but to manage information and people as well, and they need to acquire the necessary skills to do this effectively. For example, information managers will need to understand how to organize information; they will need to design front ends to information systems that allow for efficient and effective user interaction; they will need management skills to direct the development and deployment of software systems; and they must be able to assure the quality of information and its value to those who will use it to make decisions. Most importantly, they will need to understand the economic and social environment in which their organization functions and be familiar with the relevant issues in law, economics, ethics, and management.

Such a profession is inherently interdisciplinary, requiring aspects of computer science, cognitive science, business, law, library/information studies, and communications. We intend to create joint appointments and joint programs in these areas to provide students access to high quality professional guidance and expertise. Graduates of SIMS will find employment in major corporations, government offices, the media industry, libraries, and academic institutions anywhere information is created and managed.

You can check the school's Web site at http://www.sims.berkeley.edu/. Courses at the school include, "Analysis of Information Organizations and Systems," "Needs Assessment and Evaluation of Information Systems," and "Information Organization and Retrieval." Nowhere will you find words that will seem familiar to those of us who've gone to "library schools." Words such as reference and cataloging are not mentioned, much less required.

I certainly would not dispute the need to train information and systems managers for the future, but many librarians have been performing these roles for years. My concern and question is why did UC Berkeley's Graduate Library School have to disappear and be replaced by SIMS? Where will librarians who want to work in public and school libraries go for their training? Who will answer questions at the reference desk? Who will catalog and identify new materials so that people can find them in online databases? Who will tell stories to the kids in the library? Who will help the large numbers of people who need the help, training, and advice librarians can give them to find information vital to their needs? When the Internet does not provide that information and/or patrons can't find where the Internet has hidden that information, who will they be able to turn to for help? Do you think the newer Internet search engines will provide better and better ways to find solutions? Well maybe, but I've yet to be convinced. Have you tried to do a natural-language search query on AskJeeves? Well, you can certainly "ask" Jeeves, but in my experiences, I've yet to get a single answer that was even remotely close to intelligent. Don't take my word for it though. Go "Ask Jeeves" yourself [http://www.askjeeves.com/].

The need for librarians who know when and where to turn to the Internet as an additional option in the ever-expanding world of information has made librarians even more valuable to the public. Finding information from the ever-increasing number of choices, including, but not limited to, a very poorly organized and indexed Internet, has made us even more vital to the general public and students.

Now you will probably think that I made this story up, as a case in point, but I swear to you that every word is true. A student came up to me recently at my university's library reference desk, demanding to know why she couldn't find the most recent unemployment statistics for Los Angeles at "unemployment.com." I could hardly keep a straight face, as I explained to her that unemployment statistics come from the government, which does make them available on the Internet at the Web site within the Bureau of Labor Statistics [http://stats.bls.gov/cshome.html].

Knowing how to find and get the right information has become a more pressing need now than ever before. Advertisements for Web sites and the mythology that "everything is on the Web" attract more people to search, creating more and more novices with no idea how to find information. So while it is certainly true that the future will require more high-level information and systems managers, it is also true that the future will require professional librarians to help people find all that data. But the academic community's management does not seem to recognize this need, as more and more library schools either close completely or change their emphasis to information science.

A Matter of Principles

Coincidentally as I was writing this column, an e-mail arrived on the WEB4LIB list from GraceAnne A. De Candido, member of the ALA Core Values Task Force and an ALA Councilor at Large (December 14, 1999). She stated:

Dear Colleagues:

Draft
Librarianship: Core Values

The American Library Association's drafted the following statement, Core Values Task Force, to meet the need for identification of the universal principles that guide all types of librarians and information professionals. The Task Force was formed based on rec-
ommendations of the Congress on Professional Education. Recognizing that these values encompass many principles and beliefs, the Task Force added an explication of the content, but it invites divisions, affiliates, chapters and other library-related units to develop their own interpretations drawn from their unique perspectives.

The connection of people to ideas
Unfettered access to ideas
Learning in all of its contexts
Freedom for all people to form, to hold, and to express their own beliefs
Respect for the individual person
Preservation of the human record
Interdependence among information professionals and agencies
Professionalism in service to these values

Explication
The Library Bill of Rights describes our obligations to those we serve. The Library Code of Ethics describes our obligations to ourselves and to our profession. Libraries: An American Value describes our commitment to the community. Arising from these and from our own professional lives is shared core values - timeless, universal, and inclusive. We hold these values as the foundation of librarianship:

The connection of people to ideas. All others flow from that. We guide the seeker in defining and refining the search; we foster intellectual inquiry; we nurture communication in its myriad forms and formats.

Unfettered access to ideas. We recognize access to ideas across time and across cultures as fundamental to society and to civilization.

Learning in all its contexts. We select and make accessible materials that support the scholar, allow democracy to flourish, nourish creativity, permit people to learn in and outside of formal education throughout their lives, and encourage the pursuit of joy.

Freedom for all people to form, to hold, and to express their own beliefs. Each person has the right to seek, to know, and to find within the context of their own lives.

Respect for the individual person. We honor each request without bias and we meet it with the fullness of tools at our command. We respect the individual's need for privacy and for confidentiality in their search or their study.

Preservation of the human record. The cultural memory of humankind and its many families, its stories, its expertise, its history, and its wisdom must be preserved from the past so it illuminates the present and makes the future possible.

Interdependence among information professionals and agencies. Librarianship is collaborative by nature, and collections and services evolve through that collaboration.

Professionalism in service to these values. Our commitment requires integrity, competence, effective stewardship, and service to our discipline as well as to our public.

To provide further background on this draft, the Core Values Task Force has created a Web site that contains an FAQ, a list of the members of the task force (with e-mail addresses, and a summary of their affiliations and experiences), source documents, organizations to be contacted for input, information on a hearing scheduled for the ALA Midwinter Conference, and how to forward your comments, questions, or suggestions to the members of the Task Force. The URL is: http://www.wwa.com/~dsager/core.htm. This will be relocated to the ALA's Web site after the turn of the year.

The Task Force looks forward to your comments and suggestions.

You may want to forward your comments to the Task Force. I believe that the reason for stating these principles became necessary after all these years is that the core of the profession has been shaken and weakened by the lessening of core principles and standards that have always been its foundation in the past. I had a wonderful cataloging professor by the name of John Comaromi, who was the best teacher I ever had and had a brilliant mind. His words still ring in my ear. If we have a claim to being a profession, he taught me, then knowing how to catalog, organize, and retrieve information is our unique claim. I'm sure I haven't quoted him exactly or done justice to his words, but I think you get the point. I've worked with and like many systems people, but anyone who's ever read a computer manual recognizes that organizing information for retrieval is not systems people's area of expertise.

As a profession, we librarians need to think long and hard about core values before information scientists, who don't do what we do, take another school away from us. At the dawn of the Information Age, library education should be as hot and growing a field of study as computer and information systems. New programs should be under development that meet projected increases in demand for our expertise and skills. I believe we have ourselves to blame for why librarians have not better combated Internet and dotcom myths. We must continue to move to the forefront of Internet developments, which we have done well, but we must publicize more effectively our potential for greater contributions.

We need library schools that address and continue to train professionals who are equipped to handle all the possibilities and opportunities that the Information Age has to offer.  

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