

James Welbourne  
Urban Information Interpreters, Inc.  
College Park, Maryland

## TRAINING URBAN INFORMATION SPECIALISTS\*

This paper is about the training of urban information specialists, especially as it happened at the University of Maryland. There are many stories on that whole procedure and I have chosen to talk from one vantage point, the idea itself, because I think the concept and the need are even more critical now than when we started in 1970. I would like to disseminate information on what we have learned and what we hope other library schools and institutions will pick up. I will discuss urban information as a field to study and as a professional practice. I do not know what this means for people who are running urban information centers; it could be that the neighborhood information center is one base from which information specialists might work.

Our concern was to try to address the critical ghetto problems in this country today, to find those people who are best adapted to solving those problems, to fabricate a living experience that was not insulting to such people, and to communicate to the inner city residents about this service and these professionals. Always in the forefront was service to the people, in particular the Black or the poor in the urban environment of America.

One can begin by saying that information is a tool for power and control. People are kept powerless by what they do not know; they are kept powerless by not having time to fashion alternatives to repressive action. This is the problem of the Black urban poor. Our urban environment has reached a proportion of crisis now, where Black and white confront each other daily on the streets, where Black and Black confront each other daily on the street, and where whites hardly confront anybody at all. In the inner city people are dying, not because they are ignorant, not because they do not care; they are

---

\*This paper is a transcribed and edited version of Mr. Welbourne's speech at the conference. It incorporates Mr. Welbourne's answers to some of the questions asked by the participants after the formal presentation.

dying because in this country there is a sickness that rages throughout. It is a sickness that is translated into racism, it is a sickness that is translated into systematic exploitation of people, it is a sickness that creates crises in all our major institutions. This society has grown so sick it turns on its own people. In this country, at this time, anyone who talks about service to disadvantaged, service to the deprived, or helping the aged, is ignoring the critical question of fascism, of the right to think, the right to have an opinion, the right to create a new life. These are the critical problems that make any other kind of program meaningless.

People get trapped fighting day-by-day battles. They will never get on top of the situation unless they are able to see what direction they are going, unless they are able scientifically to apply certain principles of forecasting techniques in the solution of ghetto problems. We must look more into the dissemination of information for a purpose toward an end, and how propaganda is used against people under the guise of news, journalistic reporting, or neutrality. We must advise the people that they are systematically being denied information or given misinformation. Agents of change must go into the situation with the idea of opening up all the privileged sectors of the society where information abounds—at the top of the power structure where some people make decisions about other people. Urban people need to be informed about the weak points of those very institutions that control our lives and make us, as professionals, work for them and think that we cannot do anything about what they do in our name.

Urban information as a field of study is one that can hold its own in any discipline as far as concerns the researchable issues and questions, for information does indeed control the lives and the thought processes of every major professional being trained today. Information is loaded with values and assumptions, and those of us who sit at the crossroads are being propagandized every day and socialized in the way the American culture wants us to be. Those who break with it, who say there is another side, and who want to be neutral are trying to check just that kind of social pressure. We are trying to raise the other point of view, trying to give people a real choice and a real chance to see how they can control their own lives. And more such people have to speak up. There is no more proper place for it than in the educational environment.

What is the role of the urban information specialist? What will he do? What does he learn? The urban information specialist basically is a problemsolver. The urban information specialist should not be educated to work only in libraries, for the library is only one information agency in the community—a principal one, but only one. He should be concerned about people who can utilize information resources wherever they are. As far as the library is concerned, the

urban information specialist would use the resources of the library as a storehouse and a place from which he could retrieve information for the benefit of his community. The library could also be where a referral service takes place, along with the services libraries now offer.

Thus the information specialist may well design his own information space from which to operate. But more important is the role of advocate or the interpreter. Therefore, one of the critical goals of education is to teach people how to design an information service which is people-oriented, utilizes very few resources, builds itself into the community, and ties into already existing communications channels in the urban environment. Credibility thus becomes a key word in building an information center into the inner city. This concept is not new, innovative or creative. We have taken the concept from the white information specialist who has always existed in society. We merely propose that it be directed to Black people. The larger culture has never been without its information specialists, its people in the know. They are called marketing research analysts, futurists, long-range planners, special advisors to the president, etc. The CIA is an organization of white information specialists in this country. The people who run research corporations do not even pretend to give their information to the Black inner city. They study the probable outcomes of political elections, and present those data to people who make decisions on whether or not to hold their elections. Advance information analysis studies go on every day in this society.

This is not necessarily a bad thing; but, because it is happening on one side, it has to happen on the other. As long as oppressed people do not have a counter-group dealing with their information needs, they are hopelessly lost. Social commitment on the part of whites and symbolical commitment of Blacks is forcing them into doing the same thing for Blacks.

### THE MARYLAND SITUATION

We have a discipline, a so-called information discipline, a library information service supposedly dealing in problem solving, which is doing nothing. And we have an institution for library education, for training people, for bringing bodies in the classroom, for paying the salaries of Ph.D.s and others and it is doing nothing. These are all critical ingredients necessary for somebody to take advantage of the situation and try to do something. Those of us who have been critical for a long time decided to take the bull by the horns in 1970 and try an experiment with funding from the U.S. Office of Education. One unique mind in that office, Hal Lyon's, was very receptive to new ideas and innovations and gave us the green light to go ahead. From there we went to the University of Maryland for the right to choose

our students. No one entering librarianship to train as an urban information specialist was anything like the people we wanted and needed. It did not matter whether they had a bachelor's degree or a master's degree or whatever. They were not the kind of people who are educable or the kind of people who make changes in the inner city. We had to have freedom to select and choose the individuals who have proven by experience and working background that they can relate to the Black, urban poor. The University of Maryland gave us that right in choosing our students.

As far as faculty, those at the library school in Maryland were not acceptable to teach in such an experiment, by virtue of their own past background and inefficiency in the classroom. We therefore had to search outside the field for people who by experience and background have shown their ability and their willingness to work for change. We brought in consultants and people from other disciplines to work with our students.

In September 1970, these three components at the University of Maryland came together: students who could care less about librarianship or professionalism but who had a strong commitment to work with the Black urban poor to make changes; a group of faculty who were probably in disrepute at some universities, but who nonetheless were highly regarded in the community and among the people they worked with; and a project house in which to work outside the library school, away from people who wondered what we were up to and all about. In that year there were rumors and stories of controversial battles, but in that year we were to develop the critical questions that are confronting the Black and the poor in today's ghettos.

In the first semester faculty and students were just feeling each other out. In the second semester, the students were able to communicate the life needs of the ghetto. People first had to find money. The local organizations that exist to help people were in a constant battle just to stay alive, and, therefore, could not perform their services. You could go in and try to help ghetto people get more materials, but they did not have the facilities by which to stay alive. They needed someone to try to tell them how to get money, how to keep on top of what they needed to know politically to stay in existence.

The concept of research methods was found to be the most powerful tool in aiding students in the program to get a grip on how to solve the problems they saw. Research methods are tied to investigative techniques which help one look at the way in which institutions really work, turning up facts that the institutions do not want turned up and revealing things that should not be revealed, but which are good for organizing ghetto communities.

Research methods allowed our students to learn how to look at a situation, formulate a problem and hypothesize a solution. Then they

could compose a format of what they wanted to do, carry it out, and test it themselves by use of questionnaires and other techniques. The major part of the second semester in our program was designed for people to articulate a ghetto problem, design a solution, and write a proposal for testing it during the summer months. In those critical stages we were able to see the potential of the information center, and also we were able to feel the response when people began to move in critical areas.

Students of our program represented a wide variety of ideologies; they had to come to terms with those ideologies. We began by telling students first to come to the university and, since the faculty had not been in the urban environment, to learn those skills and abilities which we could teach, but to throw out those things which were irrelevant. We asked them to use these things in a problem-solving vein which they considered relevant, and to tell us what they found.

The difference between typical library school students and those in our program is that our students knew what needed to be done. Our students were people who had never been to college before, people who had only lived in the ghetto and waited for the chance for some institution to open up and say, "You can use your mind to think and solve problems; the sky is the limit." They began to fashion information services systems and solutions that were purely creative. We began to find that people who had working experience as well as life experience in the inner city were highly creative when it came to attacking problems and developing new solutions. They were much more original than those who were book oriented and who relied on past research and methods developed by other people.

In the summer, the six-hour session was devoted entirely to a field study. The student who designed a proposal during the spring semester had to carry it out, test it and report on it at the end of the summer session. One student who had been a welfare rights organizer designed an information service for other such organizers that could be set up in almost any city. It would help aid that group of people to go to work instantly, learn their community, and learn the strategy of how to get to work. Another person who had only a high school education came into our program from Brooklyn. He designed a street information service based on a street academy. His idea was to invite informal re-education because he saw a great need to get back to the community and re-educate his Black brothers and sisters. He wanted to get the relevant documented information to convince the people to organize, to get together for political purposes, and to save their communities. And yet his service was ends-oriented, not just means-oriented.

A couple of students were able to attach themselves to library situations. One young woman was able to work with members of the Neighborhood Youth Corps to teach them over the summer how to be

information agents within their own cities. At the same time she was raising their consciousness about the potential of information, and gathering information documents for the community to use after the project was over. Another student went to Detroit to work at Shore College to design an educational opportunity information center for the whole state of Michigan. He thought that Black students were not given the right kind of information about their educational opportunities. He was convinced that they were wasting their time and talents because they were being misdirected to places they were not going to build on, just places that had money. So he designed an information service that had the relevant information; he is now working there as the person who interprets Black students' needs and guides them to the best places in which to build their own potential.

One young woman designed a union information service for the city of Richmond, Virginia; she was a union organizer. Her point of view was that the union is an organization which is looking out for the interests of the common people. The union felt that it would like to have an information center which served the larger needs of the community but at the same time would help their organizers get into the community and make a closer connection with the people they hoped to unionize. She set up an information center that responded to the needs which the public library was not answering, and at the same time was the focal point for union organizing.

During the summer when the students were away in the other cities testing their projects, those of us on the program faculty got together to start pooling what we had learned, what had gone wrong, and what had been taught. We were now ready to make some critical decisions about what was really to be offered. It was a process that had to happen. The first year was for the faculty. There had to be enough reality and enough diversity coming into the minds of the faculty so that they could sit down and plan a program that just might be relevant for the students in the second year. The urban information program was always seen as a three-year experimental effort: the first year for the faculty, the second year to test out some notions the faculty gained in the first year, and the third year to report knowledgeably to the profession on the problems and the solutions, given the experience of our first-year students. All of that was an integrated process, so what has been described so far was only the beginning, only the thinking part. It is a process that was going to take some time and commitment.

We would have changed our curriculum the second year had we been allowed to continue. Our first-year curriculum was very naive. We started off with a proseminar that introduced people to information access and control, the reasons why people are not allowed to get accurate information which they have a right to but know nothing about. Another seminar dealt with information problem solving,

which taught people how to look at problems from the information point of view, i.e., to define the problem and translate it into information terms, indicating the data needed to solve that problem or to be given to the people who needed to solve that problem. This was not necessarily a content course but one that gave insights into the dynamics, the flow, the psychological effects of information—when to use it, when not to use it, where to get it and how to sort it. Students learned about the real urban information sources—not the things that librarians know as sources of information, but the communication network in the ghetto. This is information that comes from people, not books, and that helps one stay current in a problem-solving situation.

The course in media utilization was taught by Joe Niles from Buffalo who decided that the information specialists had to be media experts. They must know not just how to run a machine but when and how to choose the kind of media to get a message across to the community, how to interpret news stories so that they can detect the slant and the bias easily and report that, and how to be able to tell community people who are disseminating their own information how to get their point of view across to the news services so that the community conveys the message it wishes. We included a strong emphasis on a practicum, which is still in the second year's proposal, but would not be in the first fall semester because we felt the students were not ready to be out in a practicum situation. It was only confusing the people in the field who were working with it, as well as the students. They first needed to get the full content of the course in information utilization and sources.

The second semester included a six-hour research methods course which took research techniques and skills and put them in the hands of people who needed them to investigate their communities, and a required course in field research that tied into the research methods course. We experimented with everything from how to run and repair a mimeograph machine quickly and efficiently, to how to do videotaping. Several people went out to journalism schools and got journalistic skills for reporting information quickly.

We have been asked if we are not really teaching political activist skills rather than librarianship. First of all, we call ourselves information specialists, not librarians. We feel that there is a place within the library information profession for "political" activity. Unfortunately, words with political connotations somehow have a nasty degenerate flavor in this country. But I say that the larger society must begin to call what they do by its rightful name. Language is the way the dominant culture labels a group of people. The label immediately delineates the kinds of facilities, resources and activities this group has a right to engage in. When people call themselves librarians, this title has all the connotations that the society wants. It allows them freedom to do certain things.

I think it is agreed that people have a right to information; they have a right to involve themselves with political processes, and to have a point of view to articulate. The only thing wrong is when people act politically but do not say it, so other people do not know what they are expressing. The fact that we label the politics in the ghetto means we think it should be taught. The fact that we label organizing techniques for the information specialist means they should be taught. People need to have organizing techniques to get people together. It should not be something that one is ashamed to do. This is supposedly a free open society that invites protest and free assembly and petition as legitimate behavior. I do not understand then why people should be guilty or oppressed for using politics and political reform as expressions.

Another question asked of us is why we say it is important to work within an established institution rather than outside it. In this society institutions have the power; they are the mechanism by which people must operate in order to claim resources. Therefore the minimum thing is incorporation, attaching yourself to a structure even if you do not believe in it, so you can use the resources and be employed until you can go about your business. The same thinking applies to educational institutions. I do not approve of wasting Black students' time going to school just to get a piece of paper. But in this society the one thing that forces dependency on the white educational system is that it demands credentials.

People who make decisions are those who hold papers, not those people who have knowledge of what needs to be done. Since in any institution people make decisions because of the degree they hold, that phenomenon must be equalized at any cost. Blacks therefore need to be in professional schools to get that paper, just as white students are sitting in professional schools getting papers. I believe that getting a degree is not enough for Black people, simply because it is enough for most white students to sit in school and get a degree but no education. Practice is not enough for Black people; they must get an education as well.

In other words, first you have got to have the people, but you also have got to have an open environment for the people to think and learn in, not one under cover. For the most part the institutions have been irrelevant with irrelevant people and irrelevant issues. Because of pressures to "get more Blacks," some of the right people are getting into irrelevant institutions to deal with relevant subjects. They might succeed, but what they will find is that they have relevant people dealing with relevant subjects in irrelevant institutions. But the power is still in the institution. After a student has thought and studied and came up with a solution, the final decision of whether or not one can do it is in the hands of the institution. Of course the danger is that their efforts will bring no effective result but that it

was a good study, a good educational experience, or a good way to spend time, and now the student is back out in the real world fighting those same institutions. All three things have got to be attacked simultaneously or we are just spinning our wheels. And the institution is the primary focus. People have to continue to challenge those values, those policies, those irrelevancies, and reform them.

The goal is to develop the idea of professionalism that shifts the commitment from the institution, from making the institution look good, to the people out in the inner city. Even if it came to putting the institution in a bad light, if it deserved it, the professional ought to do it; he ought to turn on his own institution in the name of people. Since this is a concept foreign to people who are more security oriented, or who have families or an investment in a society, they cannot do it. But to a group of people who operate under survival conditions, to people who have never known anything but the everyday problems of hunger or losing their jobs, this is no great burden to take on.

However, working within the existing framework has its limitations. One solution is to incorporate oneself into the structure. You can keep telling people what they should be doing, trying to work changes from inside. But time is precious and it is running out. Some people have now decided, particularly those of us who were with the urban program last year, that we have got to be able to move outside the institutional limitations that are imposed by our libraries or our library schools and by the people who control them. Librarians themselves need to be educated about working outside their institutions. Nowhere in their educational background are they taught to be independent, to be professional outside of their institutional base. In library schools they are taught to be good employees, and they are kept that way—dependent upon the maintenance of the institution to get their salaries. Service to patrons is secondary, always secondary.

The willingness of other institutions and groups to respond to the information needs of the inner city highlights the failure of the public library and other agencies that want to be neutral and wait for people to come in. Other agencies are not waiting, for they sense the critical needs of people. They know the people need information, and they know that if they have information those people will respond to whoever gives it to them. They are taking an aggressive stand by sending out people who are committed, energetic and imaginative enough to find out the needs, translate those needs into solvable problems, and recommend solutions. The urban community is not only ignoring the library, but people are leaving the library because other alternative information systems are now beginning to spring up. The fact that people from the urban community do not always come to a library school like Maryland is reflected in the fact that programs,

such as the urban information specialist program, do not stay in the library schools. They are recreated outside of library schools. But nonetheless the fact that these centers, and information networks, are springing up all over the country for the purpose of solving and addressing critical information problems only points up the abject failure or irresponsibility of those of us in the profession who pretend to be educated and socially responsible, who go on letting this happen, contenting ourselves with the daily meaningless things that we have done and that have proven to be so totally irrelevant to most people's basic needs.

One of the comments that I have made about federally funded programs, such as the urban information program, was that they create for this profession a unique opportunity to break with the lockstep thinking among people and traditions that have made up librarianship. In one year with money, with opportunities and with resources, one could bring new blood and minds and approaches to this field which so desperately needs them. Those of us who have been in this profession need to go back and update ourselves. As it stands today, the profession is remedial; it cannot respond and it should not be pretending that it is doing great things for the disadvantaged. It is not; librarians are remedial, not the people in the inner city, not the people who have not gone through the educational process. On the contrary, inner-city people are most capable of doing what libraries are now spending a great deal of money trying to retrain themselves to learn how to do poorly. It ought to be recognized that if we want to be relevant what all of us need is to go back to school, to go back to work, to life, to live, to do something for about five or ten years.

We must turn the effective practice and control of libraries over to people who are competent and capable of doing it and, in the process, throw away all those rigid controls which have kept the profession irrelevant. Those controls have only let in people who cannot do the job and kept out the most capable people. And that is hard for people to face, that they themselves are irrelevant, they themselves are the problem. If they would only get out of the way, the people could solve their own problems. If people in the inner city had the resources that one uses to go about problem solving, some of these critical problems could be solved. What we did at Maryland was a very simple thing. We literally opened the institution to the most logical people to study and propose a solution, the people of the inner city themselves, the people who are committed to working in the city.