

Guest Editorial

Defining Success

In the library profession success is usually measured in terms of status—the position one holds, the honors achieved, the offices held. There are many who manifest these levels of achievement—library directors, ALA presidents and other officers, the winners of awards. These are the people whose names we recognize, whose pictures are familiar, and whose words often appear in the literature. These individuals represent visible success; i.e., achieving recognition through position. We would expect a high correlation between successful library directors and those who achieve success in professional organizations. There should also be a high correlation between library directors and award winners. Neither is apparent, though I have not done a scientific study. For example, the last time a director of a large academic library served as ALA president was in 1978/79. And if someone did a correlation study of directors of large libraries, academic or public, and award winners, the outcome would probably be disappointing.

If success in the professional context is the attainment of status, power, and fame, only a very few of our profession could be termed successful. There is, however, another type of success which is not tied to position or status but is based on a different kind of accomplishment. The individuals who make a difference because of the way they do their jobs do not often receive public acclaim, yet they are successful because they represent the fulfillment of the goals of the library profession.

Success can be achieved without public recognition. Each of us can think of individuals who have influenced our

careers, and in many instances, these were people who have not been recognized successes in the profession. They are the people who have served as mentors for generations of good reference librarians or catalogers. They are people who care about people. These individuals have bequeathed us a legacy—a standard by which successful activities are judged over time.

Perhaps for too long the profession has reserved the term *success* for the visible successes attached to status. In the last few years, there have been some efforts to provide visible recognition for some of the individuals who are making a difference. Both *American Libraries* and *Library Journal* annually recognize individuals who have made a difference in a way that is not usually visible within the profession, but is obvious to the users of libraries. *Library Journal* also regularly features a variety of individuals on its covers, many of whom are not recognized library leaders. A journal cover does provide recognition, but it will not necessarily increase status.

Success most often implies a level of achievement whether by position or by accomplishment. For some, attaining the goal of status is most important. However, what should be important is what a person does after that status is achieved. Many library directors never make an impact on the libraries they direct or on the profession. They come, they carry on the regular routines, they make a few changes, perhaps introduce a new service, but they do not really inspire the organization or leave any legacy. They do not make the library a more vital organization.

Unfortunately, it appears that there are not nearly enough people building on their successes. There are many opportunities to make a difference, but too few people who are willing to take the necessary risks. Why are so few willing to make an impact on the profession? How can this be changed? These are questions that the profession needs to address.

There is a third definition of success which is often overlooked. Success by status or by accomplishment is determined by external measures. Others determine if individuals are successes by electing them to office or appointing them to positions. External success can also be self-defined. Who is more successful—an individual who wants to be a superior reference librarian and achieves that or the person who wants to be president of ALA but who never quite makes it? What about the person who aims too high, whose vision outpaces reality? Are such people failures or successes? In reality, success is really a continuum rather than a constant state. It includes both successes and failures because true success is not possible without some trial and error, without some stretching of boundaries. Success is a process which needs to be nourished, expanded, and diversified to be realized.

These are conventional definitions of success which have reigned unchallenged by the profession. Maybe it is time to reexamine the real meaning of success. Success can continue to mean position, prestige, and accomplishment,

but it should also mean vision, dignity, quality, and values. Success should be a multidimensional term rather than a narrow concept. There should be room for the risk takers, the visionaries, and those whose independence and creativity tend to set them apart. There must also be a place for those individuals who uphold the values that should be basic to all librarians.

A long time ago at a management seminar, an individual commented that she thought the worst thing that could happen to a person was to pass through life unnoticed. Millions of people do pass through life unnoticed, but millions also look for their fifteen minutes of fame. Librarianship follows a similar pattern—many pass through our professional world unnoticed, and many have their fifteen minutes of recognition. If our profession is to be successful, we need more individuals who are making a difference on a long-term basis—not for fifteen minutes and not simply by occupying a position—because the successes of individuals are what creates professional success.

It is time that librarianship increase its recognition of those individuals who make a difference by what they do and what they think, not merely by virtue of the position they hold. The room at the top has always been small, and perhaps it should remain small, but if that is so we need to create new entrance criteria so that the profession will be enhanced rather than simply maintained.

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