

# Librarianship: The New Alternatives and the Old Bundle of Tricks

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## Type of Library Competencies

IT HAS NOT BEEN TOO LONG AGO when one assumed the mantle of professional service (e.g., as a medic, engineer, druggist, lawyer) through a form of apprenticeship. The same could be said for librarians. One learned by working alongside a practicing professional. Today it is obvious that the approach is different, requiring formal education designed to produce a fully formed bud of a professional ready to develop into a full-blown practitioner. That process is recognized and has become part of the accepted practice for producing our medical and legal professionals. But, is it so with the library profession?

Apparently not. Patricia Battin, Columbia University Librarian, is but one of a growing number of critics who claim that the product of a program in education for librarianship does not produce the desired results. Recognizing the salary base as a problem, she still made the following observation: "Many of us have been frustrated in our attempts to achieve substantial increases in salary schedules and to transform our library environments precisely because of the lack of talented, hard-working, and well-trained individuals to take on the resulting challenges and responsibilities."<sup>1</sup> She then proceeds to outline the type of individuals needed in research libraries today:

We need people who have been trained to question assumptions, collect data, resolve conflicts, make informed judgements, and take decisive action. We need people who have been taught to learn how to learn in a constantly changing environment...we need people who

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can speak and write well—and with precision—and who can interact effectively with a broad range of scholarly experts...we need people who welcome the challenge of re-inventing the research library in the technological environment and who are prepared to take the risks involved.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, the expectations for the development of the school-library media specialist have centered around the establishment of a competency-based education (CBE) designed to “develop skills and attitudes which are essential for performing a set of tasks. Generally, these tasks are specified by a legitimate authority in the field (a formal association or another set of practicing professionals) and have been identified as necessary for success in the given profession.”<sup>3</sup> In New York, the State Education Department has worked closely with library schools in the development of competencies and programs of education specifically aimed at the certification of the school media specialist. Although the process is in place, it has been an admitted problem because, “the nature of graduate education usually leads educators to value a theoretical approach more highly than a practical approach which deals in concretes, sees knowledge as a means to an end, and tends to be convergent, focusing on improving proficiency in specified performances.”<sup>4</sup> Inspection of the programs approved by the New York State Department of Education in comparison with the program tracks taken by those interested in public or academic library careers will show a marked difference in content and course titles selected.

What has happened since those days when Melvil Dewey and others undertook to educate people so that they could have, “the best obtainable advice, with specific suggestions on each of the hundred questions that rise from the time a library is decided to be desirable, till it is in perfect working order”<sup>5</sup> The launching of formal preparation for library service was a practical matter and the design of the curriculum reflected that need for catalogers, binders, circulation control workers, and book processors. The need for the librarian as scholar was not considered vital. And the development of a training program in library techniques was involved with the turning out of a product thoroughly familiar with the actual tasks of librarianship. From the previous examples, one can detect that vocational concerns have not disappeared but have begun to be identified with a particular institutional setting. The question has to be asked: Have we moved sufficiently along the path of professional development to allow for the diversity called for in the two types of libraries already cited, let alone others? Can we assert that our current program of education for librarianship terminating in a master's degree (usually obtained within a twelve-month period of full-time

## *Librarianship*

attendance) produces an individual ready to start to work, say, in a small rural school-district library, the Princeton University library, a branch of the Detroit Public Library, the central processing center for a nine-county system of public libraries, the reference desk at Antioch College library, or the administrative office for a regional cooperative school-district library? Can anyone graduate from a master's program in library science with the ability to perform in such diverse settings as the production of nonprint media, rural service delivery, cross-disciplinary research, medical information services, specialized automated database research strategies, service to ghetto youth, upward suburban mobility, controlled circulation, or interlibrary loan? Of course not!

### **Continuity in Programs Over Time**

The general concept and content of the programs in education for librarianship have not developed or changed at a rate comparable to that in institutions where the profession primarily practices. As Jesse Shera pointed out about library education in the period between Dewey and the appearance of the 1923 Williamson report:

As many as fifteen or twenty "courses" or "units" were crammed into this year of study, but eventually there was general acceptance of a "core" comprising cataloging and classification, reference and bibliography, book selection, and administration, and beyond these there were a variety of electives.<sup>6</sup>

That description is uncomfortably close to the layout of the program from which I matriculated in 1961. In looking through several catalogs from library schools recently, I found that the similarity has not disappeared. The demand for the practical vocational approach is still very strong and a recent example from the literature can reinforce this contention: "Graduate library education must take a vocational approach and teach highly specialized techniques. Library schools must concentrate on giving students tangible skills that can be used in academic, public, school, or special libraries."<sup>7</sup>

### **Pressures of the Marketplace**

Imagine for a moment that you are entering a library school and are in hope that when you complete the degree requirements you will be able to get your career underway. You have to take the "core" which supposedly gives you the common basis for library performance requirements. Now in the remaining time you must decide on where to

specialize: Which institution? Which type of service? What if you select the wrong one? What if you prepare as a research librarian and when you emerge with degree in hand all the hiring is going on in the school library media centers? If you are as human as the students I have been working with since 1973, you will do everything you can to hedge your bets. The student maxim seems to be to "know a little bit about a lot of things but not a whole lot about any one thing." Is it any wonder that employers are having a hard time finding the type of person needed in their institutions? I have winced any number of times upon hearing that a student who showed ability for a particular type of service in a specific type of institution had accepted a completely different situation. I wondered about the fate of that misplaced person and at the same time wondered about the perceptions of the employer who took on the student. Was this another case where a graduate entered into an institution "ignorant of the day-to-day workings of a library...how to process an interlibrary loan or how to deal with book jobbers and subscription agents."<sup>8</sup>

### Theory v. Practice Debate

Where is the problem? What is the direction library education should be taking, and if it isn't doing so, why isn't it? In the *Standards for Accreditation* used by the American Library Association in evaluating a program leading to the master's degree, it is stated that the curriculum should be a unified whole rather than an aggregate of courses:

It should stress understanding rather than rote learning of facts; principles and skills rather than routines; emphasize the significance of basic and applied research in librarianship and related disciplines; respond to current trends in library development and professional education; promote continuous professional growth.<sup>9</sup>

That statement does not push very strongly for a vocational approach. William R. Eshelman, a one-time Committee on Accreditation (COA) member, claims that it is the COA that is to be blamed. He claims that it, "allowed the number of schools with accredited programs to increase from 33 in 1965 to 69 now, producing a glut of disappointed graduates, spreading competent faculty too thinly across the nation, and creating a spurious demand for faculty with Ph.D. degrees."<sup>10</sup> He insists that a lot of librarianship's identity and employment problems would not be around if the COA had vigorously enforced the standards adopted in

## *Librarianship*

1972. But he does not voice a concern about the pragmatism of the programs' curricula.

One of the more carefully drawn papers on this subject comes from the Dean of the Graduate Library School at the University of Chicago, W. Boyd Rayward. He speaks of the conflicts that often arise between the practitioner and the educator. He explains that, "a substantial component of the knowledge of librarians is arrived at and quite generally accepted in a pragmatic way through library practice and their shared experience. Such knowledge tends to be empirical, a-historical, and for immediate use."<sup>11</sup> He contrasts this approach to the profession with that of the educator. The very placement of library education in institutions of higher education happened in the belief that there was a possibility that a practice could be developed around librarianship that would allow for a continuous, disciplined, critical, specialized, and unhurried academic scrutiny. Rayward explains:

As academics, library educators take on obligations of a kind that can lead professional practitioners to judge the research of their academic colleagues to be irrelevant, and the programs of education they devise to be unresponsive to the requirements of practice, to the hazards of the front line.<sup>12</sup>

He points out that both the practitioner and the academic have been unsatisfied with the developmental progress of the program of education for librarianship but for different reasons.

### **The Place for "Alternatives"**

One part of the problem not directly dealt with by any of the recent commentators is the one that promotes the concept that there are "alternatives" to librarianship. Although there has been no direct denigration, nevertheless, the implication of less-than-perfect fulfillment resides in the word chosen to designate those who end up with using their master's degrees outside of libraries. To go to a school of library science means to the academic and the practitioner that preparation is being undertaken for placement in an institution performing *library* services. To do anything else is accepting an "alternative."

Commentaries and evaluations of the current scene in librarianship have noted that the application of the librarian's knowledge may well become more than the management and manipulation of *things* as represented in many education programs. F.W. Lancaster, educator and one of the more influential of librarianship's "futurists," has repeatedly made the point that the "major professional tasks that librarians per-

form are all tasks in which the librarian acts as a type of consultant. The librarian is, or should be, a recorded-knowledge consultant in much the same way that the physician is primarily a health care consultant."<sup>13</sup> A recent feature article in the *Wall Street Journal* ran this headline: "As Information Swells, Firms Open Libraries."<sup>14</sup> If one were given to reading headlines only, the assumption would be that the article was about the establishment of the traditional special library layout. Yet there was little of that in the article. The main thrust turned out to be how the librarians were being called upon by various corporation units to assist them in important information-cum-problem-solving needs. Librarians were not being thought of as custodians of the physical operation so much as the kind of *recorded-knowledge consultant* described by Lancaster.

Michael E.D. Koenig reaches much the same conclusion in his commentary in a recent issue of *Datamation*. He points out that by training, the programmer-analyst or data processor (dp) is one who does not like to be bothered with the user. He typified this observation with an adage: "Tell me what you want done and leave me alone to do it." He goes on to characterize some of the training librarians can and do receive in their program of education:

Library schools clearly and deliberately foster a user/service orientation. In addition to reference sources that heavily emphasize the process of identification of information needs, library schools offer courses, such as Human Factors in Information Systems, that focus on themes like the design of user (cordial) systems, information use styles and requirements, and different environmental and cultural attitudes toward information and its use. These are topics that should be, but typically are not, taught in dp programs and business schools. The result is that librarians are particularly well suited to the task of interfacing with users to assess their information requirements.<sup>15</sup>

There would seem to be a new alternative in the works. Instead of being concerned and treating those who manage to obtain gainful and lucrative employment outside the library institution as freaks, we may soon be treating individuals who use their fifth- or sixth-year Master's in Library Science (M.L.S.) to go to work in a *library* as being outside of the normal stream of the profession. Not all library education programs are embracing the user/friendly, interpersonal communications development in their curricula. But more of them may be forced to do so. Russell E. Bidlack, Dean of the library school at Michigan, recently told a group of research librarians that all their demands for talent and creativity from graduates of library schools will be to little avail. His contention was that, "most library schools can cite examples of recent graduates

## *Librarianship*

whose non-traditional backgrounds would make them highly attractive to a major research library, but who were hired by the information industry at salaries in the \$25,000 to \$30,000 bracket."<sup>16</sup> Bidlack's tale can be embellished to include highly talented and creative people from the humanities and social science fields being grabbed up by the private sector at salaries some librarians cannot demand after ten years in the field.

### **Conclusion**

On many university campuses, programs in education for librarianship are under fire regardless of their length of service and reputation. Bidlack, in his comments to the Association of Research Libraries, implied that highly capable people who are recruited into M.L.S. programs may find upon graduation that their greatest financial and career rewards may be gained outside the traditional type-of-library service. Certainly the current debate about the state of education for librarianship is being fueled by the concern of educators that the content of coursework be defined in such a manner as to enable the schools to meet well-defined needs that will result in a successful placement. Herbert S. White, Dean of Indiana University's library and information science program, has been particularly provocative in his proposals for improving programs in library education. He feels the time for curriculum revision is now when the urge to survive is occupying the minds of so many in library education as well as in the field.<sup>17</sup>

We may have come full circle, from the vocational application of management needs to library functions to an awareness that in our newly emerging "alternatives" we may have arrived at the real meat and potatoes of the profession. It has been over a decade now since Jesse Shera called for a new epistemological discipline in librarianship. It was to be a new body of knowledge about knowledge itself. "The focus of this new discipline should be on the production, flow, integration, and consumption of communicated thought throughout the social fabric."<sup>18</sup> Maybe it is time to return to Shera and begin to understand what has happened since Dewey. Information technologies may well produce a paperless society as predicted by some, and such technology has already made it possible for library (information) professionals to exploit their knowledge and skills to become effective mediators between the user and the graphic record. "Librarianship must be much more than a bundle of tricks taught in a trade school,"<sup>19</sup> said Jesse Shera. Our profession may well meet Shera's challenge under pressure from

financially stricken higher education institutions and the dictates of the information marketplace.

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