Allerton Park as Metaphor

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ABSTRACT
ALLERTON PARK INSTITUTES ARE PART of a long tradition, but the one in 1987 has been presented in a somewhat different way from earlier ones. There were options on programs to attend, opportunities for considerable interaction, a spirit of informality, and time to share problems and learn from the problems of other participants. The setting of Allerton Park is a metaphor for the activity. It has allowed for freedom and diversity, humor and sociability, isolation and thought. It is a good place for a group to gather, to get a better grip on its pride and purpose. It is important for those of us who are administrators and leaders in librarianship to do this periodically, and we have benefited from this experience.

THE ALLERTON EXPERIENCE
To appreciate the experience of this Allerton Park Institute, I suggest a little context and a little nostalgia. I first attended an Allerton Park Institute almost a quarter of a century ago, and it seemed to me that all the giants of at least one field of librarianship were gathered there. I have come back several times and have had that feeling each time. The format would be a series of lectures, all delivered in this same room designed as a library. It used to seem to me, as I looked across the rows of listeners, that the sun streaming through those full-length windows created haloes around their heads. They listened, and one or two might have been asked in advance to comment on the papers presented. These exchanges might turn into witty, even sharp, arguments, but the institute proceeded in a linear way, all of us experiencing the same stimuli,
discussing over good meals the same ideas, and coming to a point of
culmination with the same content ringing in our heads and noted on
our tablets, to be codified into proceedings at some point in the future.

This institute has not been like that. Presentations have been
mixed, and we have been allowed to choose among several offered
simultaneously. We have come primarily from academic and public
libraries, and we have met in workshop settings where we have worked
out problems and played roles as collective bargaining negotiators. We
have not moved on the same emotional or intellectual lines so we have
not had the sense of leading or being led, in some linear way, to some
"group high" at the end of the institute.

The agendas we brought with us, rather than what was presented in
any given session, have tended to occupy our conversations. This may
have something to do with who we are. Like other Allerton Park
conferees, we are a self-selected group of people who have been attracted
by the topic. Women outnumber men among us by about two to one,
which is low for the profession as a whole, but high for the
administrative-leadership part of librarianship. More of us are public
librarians rather than academic librarians, but in size and kind of
libraries—private colleges, universities, district libraries, state agencies,
suburban, metropolitan—we are broadly diverse. One-third of us are
from Illinois, and I like that since it marks one of the characteristics of
the University of Illinois—its strong links and mutual support within
this state. Twenty-five other states are represented, which points to the
other strength of the university—its leadership—which is not just
regional, but national and even international. So we are diverse, too.

This morning and yesterday, as I once again explored the grounds
of this interesting place, I realized that Allerton Park is a metaphor for
this institute. Some of us have chatted about this. Is there no front door
to this impressive building where we meet, or are there two front doors? I
think it is the latter, with one of them opening to the stream, and the
other to the lawn. The problem, of course, is that neither is in use, and
we find ourselves coming and going through a fairly unprepossessing
entrance on another side of the building.

Some of this same feeling of disorientation is evident throughout
the estate. The long lines of Fu dog sculptures would seem appropriate
to lead toward some central point of interest, and those sculptures of
cute little musicians grinning at each other in two long lines would
seem more appropriately followed by some culminating statue, but
there is only the hard dirt path leading one to the statue of the gorilla
bearing a woman away. A gorilla bearing a woman away? In 1987 that
may seem pretty objectionable to some, but I am consoled to note that
the gorilla is clinging fiercely to a rock in his free hand as though he
knows the battle is not yet won. There is ambiguity in some of these
images and experiences of discovering Allerton Park, but if one stayed
home and just looked at some of the ten-cent postcards (and ten-cent
postcards are somewhat of an anomaly themselves in this day and age), one would not know what is real here. One of the postcards refers to the emerald turf in the sunken garden, but dry brown leaves and good dark central Illinois soil were there when I walked through it. Is it any wonder that this place lends itself to an institute experience which is more like a mosaic than a graphic print?

Our presentations and informal conversations have also been mosaics. Since many of us are experienced as personnel administrators, getting information from others and analyzing what they have to say and putting it into a context that is useful to us in the future are all skills we have developed. We have had good opportunity to exercise them here.

Diverse as some of our perspectives may be, many of our concerns are similar. We are confronted with questions about why anyone would wish to be a librarian today. It is a demanding profession, it requires academic credentials which take their toll in time and money, and it does not seem to reward proportionally those who make that investment. Here, I come up with some old answers. One reason to be a librarian is that it provides the opportunity for smart people to continue to be generalists and to utilize their broad knowledge. There are places in librarianship for minds that are playful and for minds that are literal, as well as for those that combine both characteristics.

One of the most interesting insights I gained here was about the value of heroes in the organization, as Martin Maehr has identified them. As he noted, having heroes was the first clue that an organization was a good one, and having them acknowledged by others was the second clue to the quality of the organization. Then came the question: Why was the person a hero? In the answers to that question, there is room for individual taste.

Librarianship is a profession that encourages heroes, and it is encouraged by them as well. It provides opportunity for people to serve others in very direct and precise ways. It also still allows people to have highly individual approaches to their work. One librarian with whom I worked in the early years of my career may not be the best example of a hero. But he will always be a hero to me for a number of reasons, one of which was that, when the branch library where he was the supervisor was renovated and decorated with wooden ducks in flight across one wall, he objected to them. When it appeared that the bureaucratic processes of the public library where we worked were not responsive to his objections, he threatened to bring in his rifle and to shoot them down. They came down.

We do not have enough heroes, but it is good that we have some. Perhaps more critical in today's social context, we do not have enough minorities. It seems to me that librarianship has at least concerned itself with questions about the recruitment and retention of minorities longer than many similar professions. The success of those efforts is hard to document and evaluate.
Our history in this regard has provided some mixed experiences. The several reasons for recruiting minorities have not always been clear. We have erred, I believe, in thinking that minorities should always be preferred as librarians in minority communities. I know that librarians who are committed to service can be effective, even though they are not themselves minorities. Meanwhile, like other professions, librarianship is recognizing that the minorities often so painfully recruited may be lured to higher-paying or higher-prestige positions where they will be more visible as tokens in the environment rather than as role models for other minorities. Some of the conversations about this, like some of the conversations occurring here, become cyclical, confused, and discouraging, but I think there is some reason for pride in librarianship's continuing concern in regard to recruitment of minorities, even though it has been somewhat less than successful.

Another concern that has been expressed here can be looked at in several different ways. All of us have probably commented, at some time, on the need for good quality service in libraries as well as good quality in the personnel recruited to provide that service. We do not always remember that the measures of quality of service may have become more complicated, that the nature of service may have changed. Library specializations exist and thrive today which were not even envisioned at the time I entered librarianship more than thirty years ago. However, there are some problems associated with these advancements. We need to be concerned about the fact that librarians are not always as willing to extend themselves as they might have been when individual specializations were less prevalent or less recognized. I have an example: A few weeks ago, a librarian friend who is working in the People's Republic of China wrote to request my assistance in getting a 100-item bibliography in earth sciences and related areas. He said that if he had such a bibliography he could use it as a buying list for the university where he was serving as consultant. It seemed like a rather simple request, and I thought a university library might be able to assist me. The first one I called said that they had no one with an advanced degree in the earth sciences, and no one who could provide that kind of expertise. Using the ALA Membership Directory I then called or wrote to several persons whose committee assignments or divisional appointments and locations suggested they might have that kind of expertise. I especially asked that if they could not provide such a bibliography themselves, they would forward my request to someone who could. In every instance, they replied to me, sometimes suggesting someone to whom I might write but more often saying they simply couldn't do it, or would need several months to do so. What I finally did was to photocopy pages from a standard bibliography in the sciences and send it to the librarian who requested it. It seems to me that somewhere between my lack of knowledge and my work assignment which is not in a library and the extensive knowledge of a subject specialist and a collection in the
millions, it should have been possible to find fairly readily someone who might know some of the basic titles that should be on such a bibliography and be willing to devote perhaps one hour to compiling the 100 items. It is certainly true that there are always conflicts between the orientations of the specialist and those of the generalist. I believe that it will be unfortunate for librarianship if we lose all of the strengths associated with the latter as we focus appropriately on some of the needs and benefits of specialization.

There is perhaps some irony in referring to specialization in regard to library personnel practices. Libraries, for the most part, have not finally decided what they want in regard to specializations in personnel. Do all personnel officers in libraries need to have library experience? Library academic credentials? Are these neutral factors in the selection of personnel specialists? Are they positives? Are they sometimes negatives? Libraries are not historically consistent in how they answer these questions, and it must be admitted that chance and geography and other factors often play strong roles in selection of personnel specialists in libraries. There are similar questions about other specializations which are becoming more common in libraries, but are not always possessed by librarians. I am not suggesting that there is a single right decision to make in these areas, but I do believe that some recognition of the value of other specializations is appropriate for a profession which has matured to the extent that librarianship has.

As I suggested earlier, Allerton Park as a place is a kind of metaphor. It allows for freedom and diversity, humor and sociability, isolation and thought. It is a good place for a group to gather, to get a better grip on its pride and purpose. It seems to me that has happened here for personnel people in libraries. The openness of sharing problems and of learning from the problems of other participants has been a good experience. It is true that there is more to experience and more to explore, but no one can expect one institute or one place to offer all answers. When a place is a metaphor it should come with a sense of wonder. Metaphors suggest relationships and bridge gaps. In that spirit, I have prepared what some might call a test, but what I prefer to call "a culminating experience" for participants in this institute. It was distributed to those attending the summary session and is provided in the Appendix. There are a few answers which are flexible, but, since there was no text for this experience, I can only confirm that all of the answers were given some time during this institute. Enjoy!
APPENDIX

A Culminating Experience Questionnaire for Critical Issues in Library Personnel Management

1. A first step in the educating/training process.
2. Major reason for turnover in library positions.
3. _____ ____ x WE (Work Experience) = Results
4. They resist change less when they have opportunities for conference attendance, etc.
5. This sends a mixed message, at best, when given for the wrong reasons.
6. This alone does not improve the quality of working life and may sometimes damage it.
7. Heroes are the first clue to its quality.
8. Collective bargaining requires skill at this.
9. This library officer is concerned with morale, productivity, training, recruitment—you name it!
10. His statement on library education and personnel utilization is still relevant, but would benefit from some revision.
11. An area of concern between library education programs and libraries.
12. Acquiring job ________ is a responsibility shared by an institution and its staff.

Answers to a Culminating Experience*


*Note that the initial letters of the answers spell “Allerton Park”