
Introduction

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THE CONTEXT FOR THIS ISSUE is that analog library service is in a period of dramatic change but is expected to continue well into the twenty-first century expanded by digital library service. Some would argue that the important problems of this era can be solved only through political and technological means. But this issue begins with the assumption that research is essential and asks: What are the most important researchable questions for the next five to ten years and how might they be approached? The definition of research used for this issue is the classic one Jesse H. Shera developed in the July 1964 issue of *Library Trends*:

Shorn of its mysticism and its methodology, research since (at least) the time of Bacon has been an answering of questions by the accumulation and assimilation of facts which lead to the formulation of generalizations or universals that extend, correct, or verify knowledge.... Described in terms of its sequential acts, research is an intellectual process whereby a problem is perceived, divided into its constituent elements, and analyzed in the light of certain basic assumptions; valid and relevant data are collected; hypotheses (if any) are through objective testing, rejected, amended, or proved. (pp. 142–144)

Each of the authors—people who are well known and respected as researchers—was asked to write an essay that:

- States three to five questions that the author believes could and should be answered through research in the next five to ten years;
- Describes why each question is important now;
- Describes what previous work exists for the researcher to build on;
- Indicates appropriate methodologies.

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Authors were told that the questions they chose could come from any area of librarianship and that some overlap between articles was expected.

None of the authors followed the outline exactly, but each produced a thoughtful analysis of research needed in his or her area(s) of special interest. Two of the authors focus on research questions related to libraries serving areas of major national concern: education and health care. Delia Neuman's article on "Research in School Library Media for the Next Decade: Polishing the Diamond" describes what research is needed to advance the practice of school librarianship. Prudence W. Dalrymple's article on "Improving Health Care Through Information: Research Challenges for Health Sciences Librarians" explains how three major problems in health care delivery—quality, information access, and cost—lead to many questions for research by health care professionals, including librarians.

Dalrymple raises the question of how to determine the impact of library service, a topic that is the entire focus of the article by Joan C. Durrance and Karen E. Fisher, "Determining How Libraries and Librarians Help." Durrance and Fisher pose that question for public libraries and strongly recommend context-sensitive qualitative methods as tools to answer it. Also focusing on public libraries is Virginia A. Walter's article on "Public Library Service to Children and Teens: A Research Agenda." Walter poses four key research questions and proposes a series of colloquia to set priorities for research in this area.

Both public and academic libraries are mentioned in "Outcomes Assessment in the Networked Environment: Research Questions, Issues, Considerations, and Moving Forward" by John Carlo Bertot and Charles R. McClure. These authors identify research topics related broadly to outcome assessment in a networked environment and propose a framework to relate that research to traditional evaluation. Both Carol Tenopir and Deana B. Marcum focus on digital information in the networked environment. In her paper on "Electronic Publishing: Research Issues for Academic Librarians and Users," Tenopir raises three major questions and many related questions in the areas of digital resources and scholarly work, new models for scholarly journals, and librarians as intermediaries. Marcum's paper on "Research Questions for the Digital Era Library" raises similar questions about the use of digital resources, and also raises questions about preservation and about the education of future "librarians."

Christine L. Borgman's article on "The Invisible Library: Paradox of the Global Information Infrastructure" begins with the premise that although libraries are essential to the nation's information infrastructure, they are often invisible to library users. The paper proposes four challenges that arise from this invisibility and suggests research questions arising from each of these challenges. Finally, Michael K. Buckland's "Five Grand Challenges for Library Research" is a short and stimulating essay on five

broad questions that could lead to a deeper understanding of important library phenomena.

When the University of Illinois Graduate School of Library and Information Science (GSLIS) Publications Committee asked this editor to put together an issue on research, she had just submitted a proposal from the American Library Association (ALA) to the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) for a project that would develop an agenda for research in LIS. Although agenda-setting has not been a productive enterprise in our field in the past, ALA decided to seek funding for an approach different from what had been tried before. The time seemed right since IMLS was seeking direction for the “research and demonstration” portion of the new National Leadership Grants. More important was the fact that a group of leaders in the LIS field had asked ALA to produce a national research agenda where previous efforts had been initiated by federal agencies.

That request for an agenda was one result of the ALA-sponsored Congress on Professional Education (COPE) held in late April 1999 and attended by over 150 persons representing ALA’s many units and other interested organizations. The meeting was held because many in the field believed that education for the master’s degree in LIS was failing to produce the quantity and quality of graduates needed to deliver the library services needed in the twenty-first century. The COPE produced thirty-six recommendations, six under the heading, “Position Librarianship as the 21st Century Profession,” including the one that inspired the IMLS proposal to “develop a problem-based research agenda for the next five years.”¹

The ALA Executive Board charged the Committee on Research and Statistics to develop a plan for producing such an agenda and the committee worked with the Office for Research and Statistics on a proposal to IMLS for funding to support the convening of a carefully selected group of leading researchers and practitioners, broadly representative of all sectors of the library community. After training in group process and consensus-building, the group would craft a set of researchable questions based on problems in the field of library and information services (LIS).

The proposal was not successful. But, thinking about the people and issues that might be involved in the agenda-setting effort had planted ideas in my brain that enabled me to conceptualize this issue. It seemed to be an alternative way to produce what the COPE recommended.

The result is a broad and challenging agenda for research in the LIS field—an agenda for work that could enable the LIS field to thrive in this time of dramatic change. Over twenty years ago, Laurence Heilprin spoke at the Annual Conference of the Maryland Library Association regarding the long-term survival of libraries and library schools. Heilprin used ideas from the theory of evolution to frame his presentation and concluded “the library community is a system that appears insufficiently equipped to com-

pete adaptively over the long term.” According to Heilprin, two things were necessary for survival over the long term:

In order to attain control over its own destiny the library community must keep its own members up to date educationally; and beyond this, itself perform the research that alone creates and keeps leadership in its field. (Heilprin, 1980, p. 392)

When he made that speech in 1979, Heilprin gave the library community (libraries and library schools) approximately twenty years to make those changes or it would not survive. Many things have happened in the library community since Heilprin’s speech and the community has survived. But no one could argue that building the knowledge base thorough research has been a key factor in that survival. Looking to the future, however, it seems that Heilprin’s ideas are even more relevant than they were in 1979. Research will be essential to survival, and these essays suggest what needs to be done.

NOTE

1. For information about COPE, see <http://www.ala.org/congress>.

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