Organizing for Mutual Benefit: The Academic Library as Professional Ecosystem

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It came as quite a surprise to one of my colleagues when he found out that he was untamed.

A licensed architect with almost two decades of professional experience, my colleague is one of the "feral professionals" that Jim Neal (2006) famously told us now populate the academic library. Another colleague, now retired, and a Ph.D. in Political Science who served several generations of faculty and students as a subject specialist, would have certainly rolled his eyes had I ever told him that he was a "hybrid professional" – a term recently employed by the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) to describe the role played in academic libraries by its Postdoctoral Fellows in Scholarly Information Resources (Shore, 2008). "Feral professionals," according to Neal, are individuals employed in professional positions in libraries who have not entered the field through traditional library education programs. "Hybrid professionals," according to CLIR, are Ph.D. holders who fill professional positions that require one to "bridge the divide between the library and . . . academic departments." Both of these metaphors are engaging, and both have spurred debate among librarians concerned with patrolling the borders of our field, but does either really reflect the quickly-changing, professional landscape of the academic library?

I have referred to the library profession in terms of "borders" and "landscape," but geography doesn't really provide the appropriate metaphor for discussing the future of academic libraries. Rather, it appears that, whether our colleagues are "ferals" or "hybrids," we prefer to look at libraries in ecological terms. This is nothing new; in fact, it is Ranganathan's Fifth Law of Library Science: "A library is a living organism" (Ranganathan, 1931). Ecology is the study of interactions between organisms and their environment, and, taking this one step further, we might look at the academic library as an ecosystem, i.e., a "biological organization" in which multiple species must interact, both with each other, and with their environment. I like the metaphor of the library as ecosystem; it is flexible enough to be applied not only to discussions of interactions among (and between) library professionals, but also to discussions of interactions between library professionals and library users.

While this metaphor is flexible enough to be applied to a broad spectrum of interactions taking place in our environment, let us focus on the library as professional ecosystem. Are library professionals who do not hold the M.L.S. degree really "wild"? Is the position held by a Ph.D. in an academic library truly a "hybrid," i.e., a union of two species resulting in an offspring that is "sterile . . . [and] unable to

reproduce"? I hope not! While both the "feral professional" and the "hybrid professional" may appear to be apt metaphors on the surface, each presents a limited view of the true complexity of the professional environment of the 21st-century academic library – an environment that I prefer to think of as being defined not by competition between different species and survival of the fittest, but by mutualism and co-evolution.

Competing Interests?

Both the "feral" metaphor and the "hybrid" metaphor suggest a professional ecosystem marked by competition. Competition is a fundamental fact of the environment. Different species in any ecosystem often compete for scarce resources, and such competition is an environmental reality all too familiar to anyone working in libraries. Many discussions of the CLIR program, like discussions of earlier attempts to recruit scholars without the library degree into the profession, focus on competition, i.e., are Ph.D. holders taking professional positions that would (or should) otherwise go to traditionally credentialed librarians? Concerns about competition also mark discussions of the integration of "new professions" into the academic library environment, e.g., information technology trainers, accountants, software designers, marketing experts, instructional designers, digital publishing professionals, process improvement specialists, attorneys, and, yes, architects. Does the rise of "new professionals" in the library represent a weakening of the role of traditionally credentialed librarians? Taken to the extreme, does the recognition that new professional skills are needed in the academic library mean that the species "librarian" cannot survive as we know it? Or, does it simply mean that we librarians must evolve in order to thrive in our changing environment? There are serious questions to be raised about the appropriate mix of professions in the 21st-century academic library, but focusing only on competition, or on a fatalistic view of the evolution of the library profession, is non-productive. To carry the metaphor one step further, that sort of thinking about our profession is a dead end.

Mutual Benefit

Like "feral" and "hybrid," "mutualism" is a term drawn from the life sciences – one that describes interactions between the members of two species that benefit both. Bees maintain a mutualistic relationship with flowers, as do sea anemones and clownfish (examples drawn from one of our true competitors in the professional ecosystem, *Wikipedia* <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mutualism>, but our topic today is "mutualism," not "predation"!). Unlike the "feral" metaphor, there is no assumption in a professional ecosystem characterized by mutualism that one species must be "tamed," or "socialized," to the norms of another. Unlike the "hybrid" metaphor, there is no assumption that the mixture of two "pure strains" (e.g., scholar, librarian) results in a "new kind of professional" uniquely suited to the challenges of the contemporary academic environment. In a professional ecosystem characterized by mutualism, we focus not on competition between professional species, but on the "interactions that result in benefits to [all] participating species." Diversity of species engenders strength in the mutualistic ecosystem, and diversity of professional backgrounds and skills engenders strength in the academic library.

"Mutualism" provides a metaphor that allows us to focus on the complementary strengths that different professionals bring to the complex and volatile environment of the academic library, rather than forcing us to focus on the ways in which we are different. "Mutualism" also provides a metaphor that is much more applicable across the academy – as academic programs of all types recruit faculty with complementary disciplinary backgrounds to foster interdisciplinary inquiry into topics of common interest. We need look no further for an example of this process than our own professional education programs, where faculty members may be drawn from disciplinary backgrounds in fields such as Library & Information Science, Education, Computer Science, Communications, English, Chemistry, History, Bioengineering, or Law (among others).

Consider, for example, the Instructional Services unit at the University of Kansas Libraries <http://www.lib.ku.edu/instruction/>. Responsible for designing and delivering information literacy instruction and technology training through a variety of face-to-face and online learning programs familiar to many libraries, this unit is led by a librarian and includes library professionals responsible for undergraduate information literacy programs. It also includes information technology professionals responsible for providing complementary services and programs. The KU approach to instructional services in libraries weaves support for information literacy ("Credible or Not? Evaluating Internet and Print Resources"), technology literacy ("Dreamweaver: Getting Started"), data literacy ("Finding Statistics and Data for Your Research"), and data services ("GIS Power Hour") together into a seamless whole. Moreover, mutualism in the library reflects mutualism on the campus, where "library" workshops are promoted side-by-side with "instructional design" workshops provided by another campus unit. In a world where information literacy and information technology fluency are so closely tied together, how could the efforts of these complementary professional species help but benefit one another? On a campus where responsibility for faculty development efforts is housed in multiple units, how better to support the design and delivery of complementary programs than through a commitment to mutual benefit? Most importantly, how could a library environment marked by such mutualistic relationships between its professional communities help but provide better service to its users?

Space will not allow me to provide further examples of mutualism in the academic library, but they can be found not only in libraries pursuing instructional initiatives, but also in those pursuing initiatives in other areas, e.g., organizational development, digital publishing, and scholarly communications. Mutualism can be seen in many of the areas of professional work identified by Neal (2006), including strategic communications, fundraising, facilities management, staff training, and data services. Mutualism is increasingly found in library approaches to delivering programs in collaboration with student affairs professionals (Walter & Eodice, 2007). Finally, the development of dynamic, user-centered service programs at institutions such as the University of Rochester and the University of Minnesota demonstrate the benefit of adding professionals in research design and analysis to the library mix. Taken singly or together, these examples prove one critical point: in a library ecosystem characterized by mutualism, benefits accrue not only to library professionals, but also to library users.

Evolution, Not Revolution

If "mutualism" provides a more appropriate metaphor for inter-professional relationships within the academic library enterprise than did Neal's notion of the "feral," then "coevolution" provides a better vision for the future of our profession than does CLIR's notion of the "hybrid." A hybrid may exhibit strengths unique to its species and found in neither of the original species that contributed to its birth, but it also represents (in some ways) an "end" to the original species. Neither of the parent species evolves into the hybrid form (although, certainly, like the horse and the mule, they can co-exist). Taking the CLIR metaphor of the Ph.D. holder as representative of the "hybrid professional" in libraries, one may conclude that the hybrid might occupy a professional niche in which neither of its parents could thrive. This may, in fact, be true, but I prefer a vision of "coevolution," in which mutualistic interactions between species result in "reciprocal evolutionary change."

In a professional ecosystem characterized by mutualism, complementary professions evolve together, and to the benefit of all. Returning to the Kansas example, one might point to the longtime partnerships between credentialed librarians, information technology professionals, and faculty development professionals as an opportunity for professional coevolution focused on the design and delivery of direct instructional services to students and faculty. In light of changes to the scholarly communication environment, one can certainly see the benefit (and, indeed, hope for the widespread development) of similarly mutualistic coevolution of the species "librarian" and the species "publisher" – a direction advocated in recent reports by Ithaka (Brown, Griffiths, & Rascoff, 2007), and the Association of Research Libraries (Hahn, 2008), and found in the professional relationships developed at institutions like Pennsylvania State University, where library professionals and publishing professionals make complementary contributions to the evolution of the Office of Digital Scholarly Publishing <http://www.libraries.psu.edu/odsp/>.

What's In a Name?

As Stanley Wilder (2007) has shown, the rise of the "new professionals" is a fact of life in many academic libraries. Despite the vigorous nature of the current discussion, though, this is nothing new. The academic library has long been prone to mutualism. Certainly, the Ph.D.-holding, "scholar-librarian" was a familiar example of mutualistic thinking in academic libraries for decades. The trend toward mutualism in our professional environment gained strength with the widespread introduction into our ecosystem of the information technology specialists who developed and maintained our online systems. Adoption (overt or implicit) of this trend has accelerated over the past decade with the recognition that a variety of organizational priorities – instruction, assessment, and advancement, to name a few – require us to look beyond the confines of "our" profession in order to put together the team best suited to helping us to meet our users' needs; or, to return to the biological metaphor, to fill our niche in the broader ecosystem of higher education. If so, does it matter if we think of this trend as representing the integration of the "feral" into our long-domesticated environment, as an indication that the soil in which we plant our efforts is such that hybrids may thrive, or, as I have argued, as an ecosystem characterized by mutualism? Do the terms we use for this phenomenon really matter if we all recognize it as the same phenomenon? As a librarian who also trained as a linguist, I am forced to answer "Yes."

The metaphor of the feral professional is an engaging one, but I have found that, for many, it is off-putting. The point of Neal's essay was to provoke much-needed discussion, but my architect does not wish to be "tamed," and my librarians certainly don't feel as if they have been "domesticated." The suggestion that the academic library professional who effectively bridges the gap between the classroom faculty and the library represents a "hybrid" is likewise limited – many traditionally-credentialed librarians have successfully bridged that gap for years, and the array of roles played in the academic library by library professionals who also hold the Ph.D. degree is complex (Lindquist & Gilman, 2008). "Mutualism" provides us with a way of talking positively and powerfully about the changes currently taking place in the professional environment of the academic librarian; it provides us with a way of transcending decades-long debates over professional competition, and allows us to speak about the array of professional skills that our librarians and our libraries need to hone if we are to remain relevant in a rapidly-changing academic environment. Most importantly, thinking of the library as an ecosystem characterized by mutualism allows us to think creatively about the relationships we must foster with other professional species (both within the library and across the campus) in pursuit of common goals.

If we wish to remain integral to the teaching, learning, research, and service missions of our campuses, we must embrace relationships with complementary academic professions that allow us to organize for mutual benefit, and we must pursue interactions between multiple professional species to ensure that we evolve together in such a way that we all can thrive in our new environment.

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Acknowledgements

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