

Torre Meringolo

## Supporting the institutional mission

### Libraries lead the way

I was delighted when ACRL President Pam Snelson contacted me and asked if I would share my thoughts on life after librarianship and my opinion as to how librarians can serve their academic communities beyond the library. Are there particular traits in the academic preparation and professional development of librarians that sometimes beckon us to step out of our prepared-for roles to serve in other ways?

In my own case, after completing my graduate study at the State University of New York-Albany's School of Library and Information Science, I had the very good fortune to have practiced as a librarian for nearly 25 years before being provided the opportunity to serve my institution, St. Mary's College of Maryland, the state's Honors College, as vice president for development.

In this capacity, I have been responsible for directing the external relations programs of the college, including fundraising and the management of an affiliated foundation. Ten years later, and with St. Mary's largest comprehensive campaign recently completed, the value of librarianship as preparatory training for higher education administration is something that I am pleased to discuss.

#### **Navigating the terrain**

A colleague of mine once described the role of the liberal arts in the undergraduate experience as the provision of knowledge that is a mile wide and two inches deep. Much like the liberal arts, the essence of a librarian's preparation is the development of a facile understanding of the diverse world of knowledge. While librarians may not be-

come expert in the substance of the myriad disciplines to which we are acquainted, we must somehow be proficient at navigating their terrain, regardless of our own subject knowledge obtained prior, during, or after our entry into librarianship. Certainly our work in collection development, technical processing, reference and instructional services draws us on a daily basis into such close proximity with the world of ideas that elements of them become part of our own vernacular. In this world then, the librarian becomes the global citizen who can feel at home in many different contexts.

If pinned down to a single word that describes the essence of a librarian's development, it would be *integrative*. The education and work-life experience of the academic librarian makes one at ease with the totality of an institution's disciplinary components. They are all like our children—united as members of the academic family, but each with its own distinct identity. We must recognize and celebrate this characteristic of librarianship as a unique strength of our academic training and our professional development that is essential to our roles in our academic communities.

Successful librarians and library administrators keep their fingers on the pulse of the academy in its fullest and broadest sense. As we cast an eye across our institutions, we fine tune our sense of competing

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interests' importance to mission based upon our understanding of factors such as the core knowledge base of the disciplines and the differential structure of knowledge, the strength of the myriad subject matter in our immediate institutional context, the differing degrees of demand for information based upon the curricular and research scope, and the methods and means to which different constituent groups seek and consume information. Taken together, these factors help us develop an informed sense of the library's role as a key academic partner in the mission of teaching, scholarship, and service within our institution.

### **The journey**

My own formative experience in the profession was in the public service arena, specifically in the areas of reference and collection development. What new librarian can ever forget the humbling experience of being called upon to satisfy every request for information no matter how foreign to one's own personal frame of reference? Would it ever be possible to master the many thousands of access points to the vast universe of information that our users would seek out? Learning the seemingly endless array of tertiary tools that would open up much of this world is an intimidating task both in graduate school training and in one's continuing development in the profession.

As for me, it became apparent very early in my graduate school experience that I faced two great hurdles: learning the core precepts of the profession—thus a deepening experience, while at the same time understanding enough about the structure of knowledge to be effective as a provider of information—a broadening experience to say the least. It is this expansive quest for an ever broader appreciation of the knowledge landscape that I argue is unique to our profession. And I believe that it is precisely this orientation that serves us well when we take on institutional roles beyond the library.

Consider the various paths that lead most individuals to senior positions in higher

education. Generally that journey has its roots in one of the principle disciplines of the professoriate to which administrative skills are honed as a department chair. Unlike the dual focus of the library profession, which is both deepening and broadening, the process that leads to the terminal degree in virtually every other discipline is focused on the development of a specialization in a subdiscipline of the field.

As an individual moves through this process, the result is mastery of an increasingly fractured part of the knowledge universe and a strong personal identification with that discipline. Academic administration is generally appended later in a career to the responsibilities of a successful researcher and teacher. Rarely is administration taught as part of the requirements to enter the professoriate.

Indeed a great challenge of academic administration is to harness the institutional commitment of a faculty whose primary allegiance is directed to their disciplines rather than the local concerns of the host college or university. Except perhaps for the discipline of higher education administration, most faculty in their graduate school training and early development as academicians simply do not ponder issues of disciplinary breadth and the complexity of integrating and managing them.

### **Service beyond the library**

Because of the advantages provided by training and experience, librarians really do need to be cognizant of their unique institutional vantage point and how it may help position them to provide service to the academy beyond the library.

During the years that I was most happy with my role as a practicing librarian, I frankly never gave much thought to other ways that I might contribute in higher education. My career world view had been fairly well defined by the endless scope of opportunities within our profession, which I found both satisfying and challenging. It took me nearly a quarter of a century within

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the profession to discover the strength of librarianship's connection to other possibilities in higher education administration.

Consider the activities that consume much of the time and attention of most college and university administrators. Much attention is given to planning and resource allocation. The need to both preserve and develop new revenue sources is ever present. This responsibility is multipronged and involves bringing the case for support into the political arena, as well as to all of the external constituencies, including alumni, parents, prospective parents and their children, the media, friends, and funders near and far.

Meanwhile, effective leadership requires strong two-way communications with the internal community of faculty, students, and staff. All the while the administrator must have a firm grasp of institutional mission and the ability to effectively articulate the unique strengths of the institution as well as an awareness of its limitations.

All of these day-to-day responsibilities are served exceedingly well by a profession that is accustomed to thinking and acting on behalf of the needs of the entire academic enterprise. No single area can be ignored, but likewise, all areas are not created equal. These rigors are familiar turf to librarians. They largely define the demands placed on library administrators to effectively articulate mission, effectively plan, allocate resources, develop new funding streams, and provide excellent service to a diverse user population.

Considerable time and effort is put into understanding and assessing the compet-

ing needs of the various constituent groups within the institution so that resources can be allocated accordingly. The orientation is always at an institutional level, and in the final analysis, a library's effectiveness is measured against the degree to which it effectively supports the institution's mission, rather than the degree to which it serves a particular college or university program.

I certainly find this to be the case in my current role over the past decade as I continually draw upon my background in librarianship and library administration for guidance.

As more librarians assume administrative roles in their institutions outside of the library, the understanding of the library's essential role in the academy also will be enhanced. With today's great challenges of affordability, accountability, and assessment looming large on the landscape, I do believe that librarians can and should play an even greater role in shaping the future of American higher education. *zz*

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