Ray Metz

A librarian's awareness

Strengths of the profession provide a campus advantage

I am proud to say that I have been a librarian since 1978. Academic libraries are as important today as they have ever been. Many things tempt others to think that libraries may not be as important as they were; the most talked about probably being the digitization of information. But around the world each year knowledge/information is threatened to be lost due to political regime change, natural disaster, war, or acts of terrorism. Ensuring continued access to the world's knowledge is as important today as it ever has been.

Academic librarians are more important today than they were 25 years ago. Librarians have always been required to be principled visionaries, but I'm less convinced that we have an agreed upon vision within the academy to be principled about today. And if there is an agreed upon goal, it may be skewed towards a traditional interpretation. It's an exciting time to be an academic librarian, but one filled with more questions than clear answers. It's a time of more opportunity for us and a time for more risk.

For the last five years, I've been the chief of staff for the chancellor at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. A primary focus of the job has been to work with organizational development and planning for the campus. I had worked for this chancellor when he was the provost at Bucknell University. He is a person of the utmost integrity and is the most supportive boss I had ever worked for. In short, I couldn't say no when he offered me the chance to work for him again.

For 14 years prior to moving to Michigan, I held leadership positions in merged library and computing organizations. The more I have worked with other parts of a campus, the more I have valued and appreciated libraries, librarians, and the education I received in library school and working in academic libraries. I can't state that strongly enough. The more I work with others on campus, the more I appreciate my being a librarian. Many of the strengths and skills I use in my current role come from being a librarian. The following things I believe help to give librarians a potential advantage when working on a campus. On many campuses these are untapped advantages.

• *Librarians understand what's important to a university.* Librarians understand that the faculty are the center of the university, perhaps because we either have faculty status or quasi-faculty status. It is easy for administrators to start seeing the university through the eyes or their organization's needs. Librarians begin by understanding that faculty are at the core.

• *Libraries are experienced and successful collaborators.* Libraries and librarians have needed to cooperate and collaborate on projects and services for decades. Most campuses recognize the need for more collaboration, but many on campus don't know how to cooperate or collaborate. Many of you may have noticed that others on campus don't jump into collaboration as easily as we do.

• *Librarians know how to thrive in committees.* I don't have the data to back this up,

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but my experience says that librarians know how to get things done on a committee or task force. We know how to be a member. We know how to be a chair. Librarians don't seem to hesitate to become responsible for an assignment when others may. Every time we step forward and produce results, we increase the likelihood of success for the library. This is a skill that individual librarians have leveraged, but we could become intentional in our attempt to influence a campus by doing this.

• *Librarians understand the power and influence of information.* How many of us are on campuses that seem to operate by myth rather than data? As librarians, we seem to have a natural inclination to be curious about information and data. The more we learn, the more we want to know—again, a bit like faculty.

• *Librarians are systems thinkers.* We have acquired. We have organized. We have provided access. We have provided service. The library is a system. Librarians are systems thinkers. Many of the issues facing universities are systems problems, so librarians are well positioned to be of value to the campus.

• *Librarians are constantly learning.* We love to professionally grow, and the best among us like to learn about ourselves. The leaders of our profession are constantly seeking such opportunities. It is surprising to me how little professional development learning happens elsewhere on a college campus. We are an organization based in learning; some colleges and universities are sparse in their support of staff learning.

Communicating the value of libraries

Even though I think great things about academic libraries, we can always do better when it comes to making our case to university administrations. There is no substitute for creating a quality library with quality services, but there are other ways to improve our positions on campus. My experience says that we could do a better job of being connected to the most important goals and issues of a campus. I take great pride in our library at the University of Michigan-Dearborn because it is involved and present when important issues of the campus are being discussed or dealt with.

Colleges and universities have struggled for the past decade trying to establish better assessment and review of outcomes for the educational product they provide. It is no surprise that academic librarians have also explored better ways to evaluate their libraries and library services. I believe we have been headed down the right path, although I don't have a sense that we have had the impact we would like to have outside the library with these efforts. Too many decisions are still based on the general campus culture for libraries, campus politics, or on the amount of charisma/persuasion capability of the library leader. This problem is more likely a systemic problem of universities than it is a problem of our individual libraries.

The next shift in direction for how to communicate our value to our administrations is likely to be a result of the thinking following the U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spelling's Commission report on the future of higher education. I don't know how this will shift how we communicate our value, but watching how universities and colleges respond may give us an idea how libraries will respond. Will it be rankings? Will it be metrics? Will it be testing? How do we quantify successfully our value that in the past has been more intuitive or understood as a truth? Frankly, I think this is one of the more important questions facing us.

Another way that I believe libraries can communicate their value is by creating a mandate for change in the library. Good universities and colleges are seeking library leaders that are looking to bring both stability and change to the campus library. Organizations accept stability easily. They accept change with less enthusiasm. How is having a mandate for change an important part of communicating the library's value to a university administration? Having a mandate creates an agreed upon expectation for accomplishment ahead of time. When the library accomplishes

the mandate, the administration can see that it has accomplished what it said it wanted. (administrations are simple in this respect . . . "We want you to do x. You did x. You did good!")

Not all libraries see the importance of being involved in campus goals or issues that do not have a direct connection to libraries. While every library seems at times stretched to accomplish its stated goals, I have come to view most campus goals and issues as having a budget component (finance partner), a people component (a human resource partner), a technology component (an IT partner), and an information component (a librarian partner). Not everyone has this set of assumptions, but when I was in an IT and/or library role, I viewed this as an opportunity to provide additional value from the library. The more it is done, the more likely people on campus will ask the library's opinion.

However, the most powerful voice librarians have in presenting their case to the university is the voice of everyone else on campus—faculty, students, staff, and others. Unless you are the most charismatic of librarians, the campus culture for libraries is the most influential. I've worked on campuses where libraries are still the heart of the campus and librarians are trusted colleagues. I've also worked on campuses that have been planning the elimination of libraries because of digitization since the early 1960s. Do I need to say on which campus it was easier to get ideas and projects approved and implemented?

(This reminds me of the tremendous thank you academic librarians owe the librarians who work on campuses with cultures that are lacking in their support for libraries. They maintain a vision for a great future when few around them encourage them to do so. As a profession, we often acknowledge the librarians who have accomplished great things on receptive campuses.)

One of the suggested topics for us to address in this column was to consider giving

in providing students with a framework for developing information literacy skills. At the very least, we helped familiarize them with the variety, location, and types of resources offered by the university libraries.

The exhibit was well-received, and we created an exhibit with a similar framework for this year's book—Tracy Kidder's *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, A Man Who Could Cure the World*. It touched on contemporary public health education, Haitian history, medical services to the poor, the history of medical missionaries, and global development, among other topics. ✍

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advice to librarians about ways that they could work most effectively with college/university administration. The advice I would give would be:

• first, the obvious . . . realize that no two college/university administrations or administrators are the same, and

• second, align the library with institutional goals. (No, I don't mean find ways to align your goals to the university/college goals. I mean set the library goals as an outgrowth of the campus goals.)

So, why the title "The Librarian's Awareness"?

Well, the simple answer is that I believe that librarians are uniquely prepared to be successful with university/college administrations. We have an awareness that few others on campus have, yet, we haven't tapped into it fully. Why? Perhaps librarians feel the pressure to make sure they give every ounce of attention they can get to the library. Perhaps it's that we just get too caught up in our own issues. Perhaps it's our sense of needing to position ourselves rather than the library. My experience says the more I talk about the issues that are important to my peers around me and to those higher in the organization than me, the more likely they are to listen to and support my issues.

Writing this has given me the chance to think about academic libraries and academic librarians. It seems a bit presumptuous of me to be providing advice to anyone on this topic. I haven't worked in an academic library for five years. I'm also over 50, which means I need to start questioning if I'm assuming that too many of the things I learned years ago still apply. Or if it's time for me to let someone with new answers try to address the old questions. Nevertheless, I offer the above in good faith and with good intentions.

Finally, I used to roll my eyes when university administrators would talk with library staff and indicate how they loved libraries, loved to read, and how both changed their lives. I now know that many of them meant it. And I feel tempted to say the same thing. Because I do love libraries. I do love to read. And libraries and reading have transformed my life from being a farmboy in central Illinois to being a very fulfilled staff member at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. ✍