Facing the new millennium

By W. Lee Hisle

Traditional values are still relevant in the electronic information age

As I considered what my theme might be for my year as President of ACRL, I knew it should have two characteristics: one, that it would deal with the impact of electronic information on our profession, and two, that it would deal more with inquiry than fact. I wanted a theme that would encourage members to think about issues central to our profession. Thus, I chose the theme, "Facing the Millennium: Values for the Electronic Information Age." I believe that some of the traditional values of librarianship are being challenged and, perhaps, are changing as a result of the advancing electronic age. In librarianship, I see a profession seeking reaffirmation of traditional values even as it questions them. Because of this, I wanted a theme that allowed ACRL members an opportunity to explore their own personal values in relation to those of our profession.

Challenges to our values

Challenges to our values surround us, as indicated by the debates over the appropriate use of filtering software and the seemingly cavalier abrogation of "fair-use" tenets in the licensing agreements we sign. In times of change, people and institutions seek stability. I believe that stability can come from our values: not from the way we do things, but by the beliefs we hold

as immutable. By reaffirming, by changing when necessary, but most of all, by understanding those values most critical to us and to our profession, we can move into the future with confidence.

Which of our values are being challenged? One of the more important is an altruistic sense of service. In fact, many of us come to the profession with a missionary zeal for service: we believe we can make a difference in people's lives and in the quality of our society. Recently I was engaged in a discussion about eliminating the print option from our electronic catalog and databases. Printing is a costly service for the college to provide, and cost-recovery systems for printing from electronic resources are in their infancy. It was proposed that all students using electronic sources in our college download their information and print it off-campus. Yet, considering some 60 percent of our students do not have PCs at home, our value of service argues for a free or low-cost printing solution on campus. It is the service value that

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drives that argument. Without that value, the decision might have been made to avoid the inconvenience, and cost, of printing facilities and eliminate a current and valuable service.

Intellectual freedom

The conflict surrounding intellectual freedom in an electronic environment offers another

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Join ACRL President's Midwinter discussion forum: Enduring values for the new millennium

Are you concerned that the commercialization of electronic information may erode equitable access to information for academic library patrons? Do you spend sleepless nights wondering whether the commitment of academic librarians to intellectual freedom will be compromised by protests against explicit materials on the Internet? Do you worry about how academic librarians will uphold our service values, our professional neutrality, and the tenets of fair use in today's political and economic climate?

If so, make plans to attend the ACRL President's Discussion Forum "Enduring Values for the New Millennium" at the ALA Midwinter Meeting in New Orleans. This discussion forum, to be moderated by Shelley Phipps of the University of Arizona, will explore ACRL President Lee Hisle's theme of values for the electronic information age. Scenarios will be presented, and attendees will have the opportunity to engage in group discussions about values important to academic librarians. "Enduring Values for the New Millennium" will take place Monday, January 12, 9:30–11:00 a.m. Check the official conference program for exact meeting room location.

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example of a traditional value being challenged. Librarians traditionally have been open to all ideas and have provided materials to support divergent viewpoints to all users. Our collection policies and our standards for reference service reflect the value of open access in all academic libraries. However, the value reflected by this commitment to access, without consideration of the impact of content now pits many rank and file librarians, along with a significant number of scholars from other fields, against the stated ALA position on intellectual freedom with regard to Web access.

Should we leave content decisions to parents when so many children are without parental guidance, especially in a society marked by two-income families and single-parent households? Should librarians take a more active role in deciding what is available to minors or students on the Internet? If so, does that lessen the importance of our long-held value of intellectual freedom? We have always limited access to traditional materials through the use of selection policies, special collections, and the like. For some, however, a similar policy related to materials available online is seen as the antithesis of intellectual freedom.

These questions—few with easy answers—are what attracted me to the theme. Opportunities to discuss the values of librarianship will occur during the course of the year, and I hope you will have the opportunity to join your colleagues to consider—to think about—the values of librarianship. ■

This Web page provides links to documents related to issues and ethics, the Human Genome Project, Principles of Genetic Engineering, and the State of the Art. *Access:* http://www.gene.com/ae/AB/IE/.

• **Public Perception Issues in Biotechnology.** The goal of this Web site is "to provide information on communication of biotechnology issues and the impact of biotechnology on society." Issues covered are scientific, regulatory, educational, and commercial, with a focus on issues related to agriculture and the environment. *Access:* http://www.vt.edu:10021/cals/cses/chagedor/percep.html.

• **Biotechnology: Public Perceptions— Public Information (BIC).** A collection of Web sites and documents that deal with bioethics and public attitudes and perceptions towards biotechnology. *Access:* http://www.nal.usda.gov/bic/www.html#percep.

• **Center for Biotechnology Policy and Ethics.** This center at Texas A&M University "was created in 1990 as a specific response to ethical and political challenges facing the development of new genetic technologies, especially in the food, agricultural and natural resource sectors." Through discussion groups, conferences, and workshops, this forum for interdisciplinary research brings together individuals and organizations involved in biotechnology and its impact on society. *Access:* http://www.tamu.edu/cbpe/. ■