

# In the spirit of Benjamin Franklin

## 13 virtues of the next-gen librarian

*The content presented here was adapted from a presentation at ACRL 2011 in Philadelphia.*

**B**enjamin Franklin is an exceptional role model for librarians. He loved learning and reading. He founded the first subscription library in the United States and served as librarian for a short time. He was also a great innovator. He discovered electricity and his inventions include the lighting rod and bifocal glasses.

Throughout his life, Franklin became an accomplished individual and was able to shape this country in profound ways. He was able to do so much because he cultivated qualities of character that led to his development as a person and citizen. Franklin developed a system of 13 virtues that were personally important, and he worked to improve himself by strictly following these virtues. One example of Franklin's virtues is: "Tranquility. Be not disturbed at trifles, or at accidents common or unavoidable."<sup>1</sup>

In terms of librarianship then, what are the qualities that academic librarians today should possess to be successful in their careers and in serving their users? In the spirit of Franklin, these are a proposed list of virtues of next-gen librarians. Franklin used his virtues to grow as an individual. These virtues can be used as a tool to guide our self improvement as librarians in the 21st century, though they aren't limited to that purpose. They can also be used by administrators to determine the qualities that they want in new hires, or by job seekers determining the culture of an institution. They can be used in evaluating managers or directors. The uses are myriad,

but ultimately they are qualities that we should all strive for as next-gen librarians.

Before moving forward, it is necessary to define next-gen. To be next-gen is to embrace or strive to embrace the virtues discussed below. Rather than defining the librarian's place in the field as it relates to others, next-gen defines the evolving role of all librarians. As the profession evolves, so too must the librarians. The next-gen attitude can be embodied by anyone regardless of age, number of years in the field, and even techno-proficiency.

This list of virtues of the next-gen librarian comes from discussions amongst the authors, but also conversations with other librarians and library directors. These are virtues that are hopefully widely shared across the profession.

**1. Courage—Act not from fear, but in spite of it.** Courage is not the absence of fear. It is taking action in spite of that fear. It is the ability to use fear to motivate yourself to improve as a professional and achieve your best. There are many scary things that librarians do, or should be doing: teaching a classroom full of freshmen, stating unpopular viewpoints in meetings, speaking up in faculty senate, and making difficult decisions. To grow as professionals and as a profession, it is necessary to take risks. Courage is a virtue that allows you to do that.

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During a recent ACRL Immersion program, participants discussed the scariest thing that had ever happened to them while teaching. A memorable story was shared by a woman who, like many people, had a distinct fear of teaching. She shared that in one class she felt particularly uncomfortable to the point where she got lightheaded and could not concentrate. As she was just about to leave to compose herself, she fainted and fell to the floor. People in the class had to rush over to make sure she was okay.

This was clearly a scary moment, but because of her courage, this librarian has taught multiple classes after this incident. She was even accepted to ACRL's selective Immersion program and intentionally works to improve herself as a teacher. This is a stark example of courage in action in the library profession.

**2. Flexibility—Change comes quickly and often; be prepared to adapt.** Libraries, education, and the nature of information are constantly changing. Next-gen librarians are able to scan the horizon and identify trends and impending change so as to not be caught off guard. They see change as an opportunity to improve themselves and their services, and they have the ability to quickly adapt to new situations and environments.

**3. Service oriented—Give your attention and talents to others, not your e-mail.** Next-gen librarians are passionate about quality and recognize the importance of a meaningful and memorable experience for users. With one foot firmly planted firmly in the present, the next-gen librarian is also able to look forward and anticipate user needs. The library is not simply a place to get information; it is a place to have a distinctive experience with information and next-gen librarians are mindful of this when delivering service.

**4. Balance—Budgets, time, user needs, and technology—find balance in all things.** Librarians, particularly at smaller institutions, can often be tasked with diverse responsibilities. For this reason, among others, the virtue of balance is essential to thriving in the profession. Balance facilitates perspec-

tive in the workplace and allows librarians to spend time on what is truly important.

**5. Collegiality—Learn from and share with your colleagues.** Next-gen librarians have a plethora of skills and ideas to share with their colleagues. More importantly, they know that they have a lot to learn. Age aside, librarians have entered the field at a variety of different times and from a variety of educational and professional backgrounds. Next-gen librarians appreciate this diversity and know these multi-generational environments improve the quality of library services.

This collegiality has been formalized at Towson University's Cook Library where "Teach Arounds" are held. These "Teach Arounds" consist of both newly hired and seasoned librarians sharing their interests and expertise with one another. Librarians take turns presenting on a topic either requested by colleagues or thought important by the presenter. Thus far, topics have ranged from a new technology, to a database, to print books best used to address common course assignments. By sharing this knowledge across departments, generations, and levels of hierarchy, the library is strengthened in its knowledge resulting in a collegial and enthusiastic environment.

**6. Curiosity—Be comfortable not having the answers, but strongly desire to find them.** While librarians must remember that they do not know everything, a next-gen librarian will be excited to search out the answer or a solution to a problem. Librarianship is not about handing people's answers but about discovery, both for librarians and our users. We will never have all the answers, but who is better positioned than a librarian to model the virtue of curiosity and lifelong learning for our students?

**7. Creativity—Let not your mind be limited by what has come before.** Next-gen librarians are not limited by statements like "We've tried that before," or "That will never work." They like to ask the question "Why not?" In order to solve the problems of our changing environment, librarians cannot keep resorting to the same solutions. Librarianship

requires imagination and the application of lessons from outside the field. Next-gen librarians understand the creative process and engage it to solve our 21st-century problems.

**8. Thoughtful—Ignore the bandwagon and engage attentively.** While curious and courageous to try new things, next-gen librarians know that new and different is not necessarily better. Next-gen librarians know their library and their users and consider the needs of a particular situation. They do their research without being overly cautious and are thoughtful in all of their implementations and actions.

**9. Playful—“Let my playing be my learning, and my learning be my playing.”**<sup>2</sup> Librarianship is a serious profession, but that does not mean we need to take ourselves too seriously. Librarians should foster a sense of play in the work that they do. Being playful promotes a fun and welcoming environment for students, it makes library interactions more memorable, and it opens librarians up to being more creative.

An excellent example of playful instruction comes from librarian Amy Springer at the College of St. Benedict/St. John’s University. To make her library instruction more meaningful and memorable, she used the popular television show *Jersey Shore* as the theme of the day. Springer playfully asked her class, “What does GTL stand for?” That day it stood for Gym, Tan, *Library* (rather than the Gym, Tan, Laundry used on the show) and Springer was to be called A-Woww (a nod to the show’s J-Woww character). She taught students business research based on industries of interest to the show’s stars. Springer’s playful instruction not only kept her students awake and engaged, but it also made her approachable.<sup>3</sup>

**10. Collaborative—Look for opportunities to partner with others.** The next-gen librarian sees the library not as a building, but rather an important university component woven through the campus and beyond. From student to academic to alumni affairs, the library should be present, visible, and working with all campus key players. Library

services should not be contained in a silo or confined to the library building. By building relationships and working collaboratively with various departments across campus, a little piece of the library is left behind wherever those connections are made.

**11. Direction—Set a goal and head toward it.** Next-gen librarians often work on exciting projects thanks to their embrace of the above virtues. But these projects do not arise from the ether. Instead, next-gen librarians are deliberate in their work and mindful of the goals they’re trying to accomplish. Next-gen librarians work hard to make their vision a reality, whether working on a small task or an entire career.

**12. Passionate—Invest fully in your pursuits.** The next-gen librarian does not simply work as a librarian; they approach their profession with passion. They bring excitement and enthusiasm to all that they do. Librarians who are passionate believe their work matters and do their best to make a difference in the lives of their patrons as well as the profession.

**13. Assertive—Shed the passive librarian stereotype and advocate for your needs.** Librarians often are portrayed as shy, passive book jockeys. Next-gen librarians should be anything but. Instead, next-gen librarians must be confident and willing to state their needs. They need to be outspoken library advocates. Too often libraries and librarians have lost opportunities because they were not assertive enough.

At Langsdale Library at the University of Baltimore, librarians took on the challenge of being assertive with great reward. In 2007, after serving as a transfer and graduate university for more than 30 years, the university admitted its first class of freshman. As the university community was preparing the curriculum for the new class, Langsdale librarians were able to assert the value of including information literacy in the curriculum. As a result, the university community agreed that a three-credit information literacy course should be required of all freshmen.

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final recommendations of each phase reflect student and faculty feedback.

During phase one, the most urgent student needs will be addressed:

- An instruction lab with additional computers for student use
- Quiet individual study areas
- Group study spaces
- A group study sound proof room
- A group presentation practice room

Phase two comprises considerable infrastructure upgrades to enhance student-centeredness. Phase two includes:

- creation of a self-serve café
- Writing center outpost
- IT outpost

Phase three continues the infrastructure improvements from phase two and includes:

- an expanded media commons
- upgrades to the circulation/Reference Desk and library staff workspaces

Finally, phase four completes the transformation of the Hazleton Library into a knowledge commons with the creation of an honors room and an alumni room.

## Conclusion

Using the results of the needs assessment, taskforce members wrote the final Penn State Hazleton Library Knowledge Commons Program Statement, which will be used by an architect to develop a feasibility study. The architectural designs from the feasibility study will then be used during the fundraising and implementation phases.

Formulating and implementing the needs assessment was not an onerous process. Overall the results did not differ significantly from expected outcomes. However, valuable information and suggestions were acquired via the needs assessment. The process also afforded the opportunity to publicize and acquire support for the project. The needs

assessment is a useful tool in the creation of an academic knowledge commons.

## Notes

1. Penn State Hazleton Knowledge Commons Task Force, "Penn State Hazleton Library Knowledge Commons Program Statement." (Winter 2010): 1-29.

2. James W. Altschuld, "Emerging Dimensions of Needs Assessment," *Performance Improvement* 43, no. 1 (January 2004): 10-15.

3. Michael J. Whitchurch, "Planning an Information Commons," *Journal of Library Administration* 50, no. 1 (2010): 39-49. ♪

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*("In the spirit of ..." continued from page 452)*

There is no way that every librarian can possess all of these virtues in full measure at all times. They are not intended as a checklist. Instead these virtues should serve as a guide for development as a professional. They are qualities that librarians in the 21st century should strive for in their work and encompass much of what is necessary to be a successful, dynamic, next-gen librarian. They can inspire individuals but can also be used across the library community as a model for excellence in librarianship. Librarians today and in the future will constantly need to be re-tooling and reinventing themselves. These virtues provide a framework for continued self-improvement. And striving for improvement is the attitude that embodies a next-gen librarian.

## Notes

1. Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin, 1986), 92.

2. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A study of the Play Element in Culture* (London: Temple Smith, 1970).

3. Amy Springer and Kathryn Yelinek, "Teaching with The Situation: *Jersey Shore* as a Popular Culture Example in Information Literacy Classes," *C&RL News* 72, no. 2 (2011): 78-118. ♪