



VISIONS

edited by Don L. Bosseau and Susan Martin

Future History Revisited

by Don L. Bosseau

Less than three years ago, a group of librarians came together over concern for the future of the profession. Their assemblage was not the result of spontaneous combustion, nor was it due to a simple coincidence. It was, appropriately, facilitated by the Internet and the heavy traffic of communications that members of this group conducted via electronic mail and through several listservs. In effect, the formation of the VISIONS' Strategic Planning Committee was brought about, in part, through the same catalytic instruments of change that were placing new stresses on the profession. Those stresses were alternately viewed as either threats to our future well being or opportunities to enhance and insure the profession's future.

Those early activities, in retrospect, reflected some ongoing concerns about the electronic processes which speed our communications (e.g., like many erasable electronic media, they were poorly documented). However the nature of the activities initiated by and encouraged by the VISIONS' effort was, and is, on target. A host of meetings held in different forums, assisted by a grant from the Council on Library Resources, expanded the number of participants addressing the future of the profession. Many of these discussions started on listservs such as Pacs-L and Libadmin before transferring to the VISIONS listserv. An abstract of the early electronic dialogue conducted through the VISIONS' listserv would encompass much of what has actually occurred—with respect to the functions of librarians and the scope of activities conducted under the umbrella of “libraries” as organizations and institutions. The candid discussions opened up by VISIONS have spread to other arenas, other professional and related associations and organizations, and the profession has definitely changed course.

On a related note, graduate schools of library and information science were well aware of new challenges, and in some cases, extinction. Their future appears to be looking up—not because some of them adopted elements of the VISION Statement and the Qualities and Values Statements—but because they have faced the need to change and are pursuing change. Some of the restated goals of these programs (e.g., the University of California, Berkeley) reflect the demands of the so-called information age, but they also respond to political realities of high-powered research universities. Dr. Ralph R. Shaw, upon leaving his deanship at Rutgers University to establish a new graduate program in librarianship at the University of Hawaii, explained that he was naming it the “Graduate School of

Library Studies” because librarianship was not a science. That does not denigrate the profession and it is in the company of other professions which cannot claim a pure scientific basis. Shaw suggested that cataloging was more of an art since precise and accurate classification could not measure up to the equations of mathematics and physics (for example). In western “scientific-based medicine,” even dermatologists have been known to admit that their work frequently lies closer to being an art than a science.

In academic environments the aforementioned issues and phenomena add up to increased visibility and exposure for libraries. The services we provide are, for the first time, services that other departments and colleges can offer on their own. For example, setting up gophers to search the Internet is not the sole domain of libraries. Access to online databases and accompanying full-text retrieval features can also be engineered directly by other campus entities. The traditionally sacrosanct status of library budgets (especially the allocations for books and journals) is rapidly disappearing. In fact the whole library budget seems to be more exposed now. Aspects of the old VISIONS discussions which were introspective and contemplative are now manifesting as live topics on many campuses. Along with and as a result of these changes, the library is emerging as a much more active player in campus politics—but not necessarily by choice!

Library representatives on campus data communications committees and the various computing committees find themselves involved in decisions ranging from the setting of guidelines for placing servers on the campus backbone to selecting electronic mail systems. In these arenas too, some of the things that the profession was worrying about only a few years ago have come to pass.

The profession has responded and reacted to change, and there is increasing evidence that librarians have taken the lead in the new arenas. The proverbial train has, indeed, left the station, but the libraries, unlike the old caboose, continue to be an important part of the train! A recent informal survey of the status of gophers on a group of campuses clearly indicated that the level of success as measured by how well it is managed (as in incorporating campus-wide input) and organized (as in user friendliness) correlated closely with the degree of library involvement. The best ones reflected the professional touch of librarians and clearly capitalized on the knowledge librarians have about how people search for information, and the expertise required to enhance access. The profession has not shunned its obligations and commitments to traditional (and necessary) collections and services, but neither has it shied away from taking on the host of electronic information formats as they surface.

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The battle has not been won, for there is no battle to win. Consistent with the predictions that people in the 21st century will likely engage in sequential careers instead of lifetime careers, our work will likely entail ongoing change and accommodation. We are already getting used to it, but it is, definitely, more work!