



## VISIONS

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# Responsibility and Opportunity: Moving the Library to the Forefront

by Don L. Bosseau

**A**cademic libraries have taken on expanded roles as major contributors to, and as campus providers of, a growing array of electronic services. In some cases, librarians and library administrators have aggressively pursued these responsibilities, while, in other situations, the libraries have accepted the inevitable assignment of some new obligations. The grafting onto the library organization of many of these technology-related operations is a new phenomenon for libraries. Will these new patterns become entrenched as a permanent fixture of library turf? Or, will they prove to be fleeting remnants at some future date of what was once referred to as the information age? In other words, will the developments facilitated by computers, mass storage, and data communications have the same kind of long-range impact on libraries as that launched by the printing press?

The immediate impact is apparent and it is heavily weighted by the influx of digital information resources—resources to which libraries are expected to provide routine access. Are there any recipes for success in this environment of moving targets? Is there a strategy to which libraries could universally adhere? Clearly, there are no simple solutions to these perplexities. The campus culture and political realities influence and shape the eventual placement of the various organizational and operational responsibilities related to the new information delivery systems. In a similar fashion responsibility for equipment maintenance and infrastructure (data communications and connectivity) usually finds its home in a campus organization through the same political processes. When all or some of these operational responsibilities are included under the umbrella of the library organization, that determination may reflect a natural extrapolation of the strengths that libraries bring to the table. However, the library as the host site for these responsibilities may have come about as a result of risk taking involved with innovation. Where and/or how does the library position itself within a growing matrix of possible options?

The complete library will address all aspects of delivering books, journals, databases, and other information-containing formats to the patron. The formats of the future are unknown. As the chief arbiter between information seekers and the content they seek it seems incumbent upon the library to have as much control as possible over the processes and systems required to identify and deliver that content. That means the library must actively pursue influential working relationships with the campus organizations that control the infrastructure, or

it must invest its own resources in these endeavors. Ideally, the library should expect support in the form of new positions to augment and strengthen its staffing expertise in computer and related technology areas. However, in an era of downsizing, libraries are unlikely to find campus administrators standing in line to reallocate scarce positions to the library. To gain support in these competitive times, the library needs to position itself and market the advantages and strengths which librarians and library staff members can bring to digital information processing as well as the traditional service areas.

Quality control of information sources has always been encompassed within the processes of authority control and cataloging. Evaluation of Web sites for aspects of quality, reliability, and searchability is an activity which libraries are ideally suited to undertake. Some libraries are already engaged in this activity. It represents an extrapolation into new areas of the type of value-added service that libraries have always offered. Traditionally known as cataloging, it represents a new, yet natural, direction for libraries to explore. It also presents a substantive service which no other profession is as well positioned to offer. Recruitment ads for librarians to fill such jobs are now appearing in professional journals.

The old models for bibliographic instruction have been taking on a new look in the form of library offerings couched in terms like information competency and/or computer literacy. Again, the expertise which is resident in the library staff provides a strategic advantage. Librarians are well positioned to take the next step involved in teaching students (and faculty members) the methodology and approaches required to search electronic information sources effectively. And, libraries have clearly been in the vanguard of offerings in these domains. These actions represent natural extrapolations into previously unexplored territories, but librarians have also applied innovative approaches. Where funding, reallocation of resources, or reliance on resourcefulness has made it possible, the addition of "smart classrooms" to the libraries repertoire has helped transform the substance and the image of the library on a campus into a leader in information technology. Is that good? If the library is to remain as the leading source and symbol for access to information, then, yes, it would seem to represent a move in the right direction.

Most academic libraries offer some or all of these natural extensions of traditional services. Many are providing other value-added services which involve digital information in networked environments. These services range from electronic course reserves to the design of Web interfaces to facilitate uniform front-ends to disparate databases. The fundamentals of librarianship and the experience of a long tradition of putting

people in touch with the sources of information they need makes the library a key organization in the broad spectrum of activities now required to deliver information.

### **RESPONSIBILITY AND OPPORTUNITY**

In most settings, libraries are the primary information providers in most formats, regardless of the level of posturing they have manifested on campus. However, the perceived levels of performance from library services are typically dependent on the efficiencies and effectiveness exhibited by other campus entities. Of particular importance are the reliability and bandwidth capacity of the campus backbone. Following that, the level of customer satisfaction attributed to CD-ROM networks and the internal library connectivity become critical measures. Ultimately, the speed, quality, and reliability of the workstations and attendant peripherals, especially printers, enter the equations which determine reputation.

The degree to which a library contends with the separation of responsibility and authority for these components of elec-

tronic delivery systems may approximate the proverbial bottom line. The more control the library exerts over the various components of these systems, the more likely it can influence its own destiny. To have responsibility (real or perceived) for too many components without the authority to maintain their functionality is a major source of problems for many libraries. If the power is out, or a router in the network is malfunctioning, the library is, for all practical purposes, closed to its most active clientele. "Techies" with expertise in support functions associated with computers, printers, networking, netware, etc., are invaluable to the library. Without them, the library has, by definition, a real separation of responsibility and authority. Moving into the fray requires leadership, some flexibility with existing resources (or new ones), and an orchestrated approach to achieve an influential role in the management of the wide array of technical systems which comprise the backbone for many facets of the modern library.