

Back Talk — Libraries Are In Great Shape to Survive and Thrive

Column Editor: **Anthony (Tony) W. Ferguson** (Library Director, University of Hong Kong; Phone: 852 2859 2200; Fax: 852 2858 9420) <ferguson@hkucc.hku.hk>

As I thought about the upcoming **Charles-ton Conference**, memories of all sorts of hand-wringing activities about the future of libraries have come to mind. There were many optimistic talks, but there were also countless discussions about the negative effects of the Web/electronic information on libraries functionally and as places. Thankfully, all the bad predictions have not come to pass. I say thankfully, not just because I make my living working in these wonderful collections of bricks and content, but because I am continually impressed by the mind-expanding roles libraries can play in lives of all those who walk through their doors physically and electronically.

My optimism was buoyed even further after reading an excellent article in the July/August 2003 issue of *EDUCAUSE Review* by **Donald E. Hanna**, an educator and leader in lifelong learning: “Building a Leadership Vision: Eleven Strategic Challenges for Higher Education.” I believe, and I think you will too, that libraries have already conquered many of these challenges or are well positioned to meet them successfully. Let me recount his challenges and say why I think libraries are doing quite well:

1. **“Remove boundaries between ourselves and the community.”** Academic libraries have always known that they needed the support of the larger community to survive. While it is noble to consider all students as our alumni, when it comes to fund raising, we have always looked beyond campus borders for support and this has in turn required us to consider the community’s needs and how we appear to its members. State supported university libraries do a great job of this and my hat goes off to places like San Jose which have integrated public and academic library service programs.
2. **“Establish interdisciplinary programs.”** While we jump through hoops at times trying to reconfigure our libraries as departmentally-friendly support teams, the Dewey and LC classification systems basically bring all information together without the organizational accoutrements that divide our faculties.
3. **Supporting “entrepreneurial efforts and technology.”** Again, while the faculty may be still trying to make the jump from tried and true sets of lecture notes, or even new notes but delivered traditionally, our libraries are typically five to ten years technologically out ahead of most other campus efforts.
4. **“Redesigning and personalizing student support services.”** I don’t know about your campus, but on ours we had a My Library application in place before the complexities of the whole campus

made a My Campus application possible. Libraries have also traditionally looked to students/users to help them determine what services need to be provided – especially in the last ten years.

5. **“Emphasizing connected and lifelong learning.”** I hate to gloat but libraries are lifelong learning centers.

The exclusionary policies of many private institutions have limited this function to members of the campus community and alumni, but libraries are unrivaled (except perhaps by the Web) as places where knowledge can be accessed by everyone without regard to background.

6. **“Investing in technologically competent faculty.”** Since the late 1960’s when libraries replaced typewriters with computers to create catalogue cards and provide online bibliographic access, they have been sources of technological re-tooling. I remember with a smile, hearing some of the same clerical staff who were terror stricken about having to learn how to use computers the first time, complain again, when they had to learn how to use a second or third integrated library system — yet, the techno levels of their gripes had risen considerably. Libraries and the staff who work in them simply accept that they have to be learning all the time.

7. **“Building strategic alliances with others.”** Librarians, I have often joked, wake up in the morning thinking cooperatively. While that might not have always been so, our lives are tied up in bibliographic utilities, resource sharing agreements, and now consortial buying activities. Cultural experiences like **ALA, PLA, SLA**, and the additional hundreds of other acronyms we employ to consume our spare time all testify that we are in the alliance building business.

8. **“Incorporating learning technologies into strategic thinking.”** Sometimes I fear we take this to an extreme. I always remember with a fondness a remark made to me by a colleague shortly after I arrived at **Columbia** eighteen+ years ago, “Tony, it is so refreshing to hear the word book again.” We have been thinking strategically for a long time (not always carrying our plans out) and technologically for the past thirty years.

9. **“Measuring program quality.”** This has become another obsession of our field. I just checked the **Library Literature and Information Science** option in **WilsonWeb** and got 1,380 hits for quality, 187 for TQM, and a “library quality” search of the database our patrons use, **Google**, got 3,620 hits.

10. **“Achieving institutional advantage.”** This means, as the author points out, many things to different people. For some libraries they have long understood the need to build on existing collection strengths. This may be an area where we as librarians need to do some additional thinking.

11. **“Transforming bureaucracy, culture, and assumptions.”** This is, as is known in library circles, the “vision” thing. We are actively grappling with this. With one foot in the printed past and the other in the digital future, we are actively trying to figure out how to chew gum, hum, and dance at the same time. The author talks about the need for non profit colleges and universities to compete with for profit institutions. For libraries, as the ultimate non profit but black hole consumers of funds, our challenge is to compete with the free Web.

My intent in this review of the eleven strategic challenges facing higher education has been to show how well libraries are doing. Yet, we still have some work to do: We need to

- get even closer to the communities in which we live. Especially for libraries associated with private institutions, we need to discard the “us and them” mentality that stops non-students from having some meaningful access to our holdings;
- make our libraries as easy to use for disciplinary specialist as non specialists;
- give our staff the freedom to try out new forms of technology without making them battle their way through the committee structures that dominate many modern libraries;
- not lose sight of our need to bring users and information together as we satisfy our need to collaborate with each other in hundreds of organizations;
- work with other libraries to develop areas of true strength so that all of our users benefit; and of course
- be willing to detach our finger holds on the ways we have done things in the past.

We have much to do, but I remain proud to be a librarian and pleased with how well we are doing as participants in the larger educational enterprise. 