

## Op Ed — IMHBCO (In My Humble But Correct Opinion)

## On Knowing the Value of Everything and the Price of Nothing

by **Rick Anderson** (Director of Resource Acquisition, University of Nevada, Reno Libraries; Phone: 775-784-6500 x.273) <rickand@unr.edu>

There's an old aphorism that says "a cynic is a man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing." It's a fair point: knowing what something costs in the marketplace is all well and good, but it doesn't necessarily tell you much about what that thing is "really worth" in any deeper sense. It may cost a baseball team \$2 million annually to employ a great player, for example, but is the player's labor really "worth" that much? The market price for a 2007 **Bentley Continental GT** is around \$190,000. Is any car actually worth that much money?

A cynic will snort at the very question: Hey, if a sucker is willing to pay \$190,000 for a car, then that's what the car is worth. But those of us who are less dismissive of morals-and-values questions may be inclined to give the issue a bit more thought. What's a car "really" worth? Its primary value lies in its ability to take you, with reasonable comfort, safety, and speed, from one place to another. A **Chevy Aveo** fulfills those basic functions just as well as a **Bentley** does, and for \$180,000 less. What you get if you buy a **Bentley** instead of an **Aveo** is a modicum of additional comfort and a great deal of additional prestige. So the real question is whether the prestige conferred on a **Bentley** driver is worth \$180,000. Again, the cynic will say that prestige is worth whatever it can be sold for. You and I might think about all the people who could be fed, clothed and educated for \$180,000 and conclude that, morally speaking, a **Bentley** is not worth the price.

But before we start congratulating ourselves on our morality and lack of cynicism, we may want to pause for a moment and think about how the aphorism applies in our libraries. Are there things for which we pay a price that is far out of proportion to their value? Or, to put it another way: are we ever guilty of wasting time and money (neither of which is ours to waste) on practices simply because they're "valuable," without considering whether there's a reasonable balance between what they're worth and what they cost?

In libraries, where we recognize a responsibility to serve not only the needs of the majority but also those of often underserved minorities, we tend naturally to think in terms of "just-in-case" scenarios: we need to buy a particular

book, this logic goes, not necessarily because we think it will certainly be useful to many people now, but because there's a chance that it may be of use to someone some day. Similarly, we try to provide for future situations that may not be terribly likely, but that could take place in the future: we send paperbacks out for expensive commercial binding not because there's any real reason to anticipate heavy use of them, but because they could be damaged if they were used heavily. Or we carefully track and register changes in a journal's publication patterns, because if our catalog fails to reflect the fact that it's changed from quarterly to semiannual, then... well... something terrible might happen. (Not sure what it is, but something.) Anyway, my point is that many of us exhibit a real inclination to think that as long as we can establish that a practice has value, then the conversation is over: we must do it because it's valuable, or potentially valuable, regardless of what it costs — and anyone who suggests that the practice is too expensive is a cynic who thinks only in terms of the bottom line.

Obviously, though, we can't afford to do everything that's valuable. So really, we have two choices:

**Choice A:** Continue doing those valuable things that we've always done, while letting other and potentially more valuable practices wait in the wings.

**Choice B:** Look at all the options available to us — all the familiar practices plus all the new and/or different options — and choose to do those things that are most valuable first, and to do those things that are less valuable only as time permits.

Choice A allows us to continue doing things that we're good at and that we're comfortable doing; it also entails little risk of upsetting patrons with dramatic changes to our content and services. On the downside, by placing a premium on continuity instead of efficiency and value, it virtually ensures that our services will never improve significantly. Choice B puts old and new practices on an equal footing, and leads us to judge all practices based on the value they offer rather than letting existing practices stay in place by virtue of inertia. On the

downside, it's more work for us.

As professionals, I think it should be clear to us that Choice B is the better of the two. It's not our job to keep doing what's been done in the past, nor is it our job to chuck what's been done in the past and do something different. It's our job to evaluate the available options and pick the ones that will serve our patrons best, keeping our own preferences, prejudices and comfort out of the equation.

So how does this type of thinking translate into actual, everyday library work? Obviously, it should lead us to think critically about everything we do. Does routine claiming for late journal issues provide value? Of course it does. Is there value in subject authority work, and binding, and bibliographic instruction, and in traditional forms of collection development? Absolutely. But since we have limited — sometimes severely limited — resources, and therefore can't do everything that's valuable, our conversations about workflows, practices and services have to go beyond the question of what is and isn't valuable. The question that we have to ask ourselves — urgently, dispassionately and constantly — is whether the things that we're doing are the most valuable things that we could be doing with the limited amount of time and money available to us.

But this begs another question: how will we define value? I suggest that we do so in one way, and one way only: patron service. Nothing that we do in any department in the library has any meaning except to the degree that it ultimately brings patrons together with the information they need. Our purpose isn't to build great collections, nor is it to teach research skills, nor is it to build efficient acquisitions workflows. Those are all things that we do in the service of our real purpose, which is to get information to patrons. These are not intrinsically valuable activities that should be preserved because they're what a good library does; they are instrumentally valuable activities that should be preserved only to the extent that they help us toward the goal of connecting people with desired information. We've got to be ready to replace those activities, and any others, with different activities

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if the different ones will better help patrons get the information they want.

All this is well and good in theory, but what might such decision-making look like in the real world? The **Library of Congress** exhibited this kind of hardheaded, rational thinking recently when it decided to abandon the creation of series authority records for newly cataloged titles. How did it justify that decision, which enraged many librarians? In a memo dated April 20, 2006,<sup>1</sup> LC explained itself concisely: “We recognize that there are . . . some adverse impacts” (translation: series authority work is valuable), “but they are mitigated when the gains in processing time are considered” (translation: given competing priorities and a limited staff, other needs are more urgent than this one).

Now, LC’s thinking may have been sound, but was its decision the best one? From outside the institution, it’s difficult to say. Those on the outside, who make use of LC’s authority records (and whose patrons theoretically benefit from them) see the adverse effects of LC’s decision, but can’t easily see the upside. What will LC now be able to do that it couldn’t before, when its staff was spending time on series authority records? Are the new activities

more valuable than the old ones? LC might be wise to publicize the answer to this question.

The same principle holds in our institutions. We shouldn’t expect our patrons, or other members of the staff who receive our departmental outputs, to simply take our word for it when we say “We’re not doing Activity X anymore because it’s not valuable enough to justify our time.” Instead, we have to show them how we plan to use our time better, and we have to be able to explain why the new activities will be better. Before we implement the changes, we need to solicit input so that we can anticipate the potentially adverse effects and factor those effects into the cost/benefit equation. Then, having made a (hopefully) rational choice, we have to demonstrate that the choice we made was, in fact, the best one for our patrons.

Because after all, this isn’t about rejecting old practices in favor of new ones — it’s about rejecting low-value practices in favor of high-value ones. 🐘

### Endnotes

1. “The Director for Acquisitions and Bibliographic Access Announces the Library of Congress’ Decision to Cease Creating Series Authority Records as Part of Library of Congress Cataloging.” 20 Apr 2006. Accessed 27 Sep 2006 <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/series.html>.