

Editorial

Not so long ago, schools of library science or librarianship, as they were then called, had a widely perceived and understood mission – to educate students for professional posts in libraries of various kinds. Debate might take place about the detailed content of the curriculum (constructed around the tripartite themes of bibliographic control, organisation of information and management), but on its general thrust ruled a consensus. Jobs were plentiful and graduates from the schools entered them with the intention of a life-long career in librarianship.

This simple picture began to change as the importance of information in decision-making became appreciated and information services were seen as something which could take place outside of libraries. This was accompanied by the introduction of computers to information storage, retrieval and dissemination. Initially these developments augered well for librarianship and the library schools which supplied their professional personnel. Technology was widely perceived as raising the status of librarians, and an “emerging market” for the information literate outside of libraries was identified. Graduates with information skills, it was argued, would be in demand for positions in the corporate environment where salaries and status would be higher than libraries could afford. Debate swirled around the precise definition of “emerging market” and its actual size in employment terms, but for many it seemed to offer exciting and profitable outlets for the students streaming from a growing number of library schools. The term “information” was rapidly included in the names of schools and their programs.

Even during these days of optimism, warnings were sounded. Some queried the reality of this new market, at least as a significant increment to existing posts in academic, special and public libraries. Others warned that the lure of such posts, especially if linked to information technology, would attract marauders from other fields such as management and computer science. It was also pointed out that while technology in its early stages required expertise to control it, in the longer term technological developments might simplify tasks so that end users (another new term) could find information for themselves without the intervention of an information intermediary: “anyone can push a button”.

These concerns have proven justified. The emerging market for most schools has not emerged very fully. It seems probable that a majority of students graduating from programs in library and information science will find jobs in libraries. At the same time, competition for those jobs that have materialised in information management and information technology is coming from the products of management and compu-

ter science programs. Furthermore, the widespread use of computers and networks is now having a negative impact rather than a positive impact on the number of library positions advertised, fueled in many countries by an accompanying economic recession.

One response of the schools of library and information science has been to modify their curricula so as to move them closer to those found in computer science and business studies. This may be accompanied by closer administrative links, such as the re-location of the former library school in the faculty of management. While such campus re-alignment may prove useful, there is also danger present. Many universities are in financial travail, and are therefore looking for ways to reduce costs. One route is to close units which are not considered central to the university's mission. A school which aligns too closely with a bigger unit in curriculum, teaching and administration might seem ripe for closure, its information-related teaching being subsumed within the larger unit and its programs in library and information science per se being terminated.

It is vital that schools of library and information science retain a sense of their own identity: what it is that they do which differentiates them from everyone else. Without a distinct identity they become superfluous. This is not to argue that the schools should not forge meaningful teaching and research links with other units: in a multi-disciplinary field such as ours this is essential. But it is to point out the risks of doing this in the absence of a strongly identified focus. Stubborn resistance to modify programs in the face of profound external changes in the information world is a recipe for disaster. But the balance between evolution and extinction is fine.

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Editor