



President's Column

Catherine Murray-Rust

As I write this column, 2006 is just beginning. Gracing the corner of my desk is a card from my colleagues in the LAMA office. It says "An investment in libraries is a gift that lasts a lifetime. Celebrate the New Year @ your library®." The question

is how will we, who work in libraries, choose to celebrate?

Will we promise to find out more about the people who use and don't use libraries? And how will this information result in better collections and services for our communities? As everyone in our profession knows, we are living and working in a very precarious time for libraries. Public funding bodies and private donors wonder if libraries still matter as much as they once did. Support for libraries from tax revenue is diminishing, even in communities where the public library serves a crucial social role for the young, the elderly, and new immigrants. Academic libraries are taking on new programs to create and preserve electronic information without sufficient budget increases to support these efforts. The stereotypical librarian who continually warns people to be quiet is still the dominant image in the media.

Recent reports on the future of libraries, both public and academic, confirm that the public's perception of the value of libraries and librarians is out of synch with current reality. OCLC released *Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources* in December 2005.¹ In this summary of a six-country study, the authors address the issues of library use, awareness of library electronic resources, Internet search engines, fee versus free, and the library brand. The findings are not surprising, but they are chilling for those responsible for creating a bright future for libraries and librarians.

OCLC reports that information consumers are using libraries less frequently since they began using the Internet, and the majority of those surveyed expect that their library use will be flat in the future. Borrowing books is the most-used service, and books alone are the library brand. Electronic information sources are not known and not used by most information consumers. As expected,

college students use the library most, but only 10 percent of them say that their library's collection fulfills their information needs.

On a more positive note, the majority of respondents are aware of the community services offered by libraries and they agree that libraries are places to learn. They want physical spaces that are appealing—bright, clean, warm and comfortable—have friendly staff and convenient hours. Those surveyed strongly recommend that libraries make sure their services are better known and offered at a distance.

The authors conclude:

... attachment to the traditional nature and purpose of libraries is an asset all libraries share. It is not clear that this attachment extends, or will extend, to electronic resources or that it will have a significant impact on an information consumer's choice of information resources in the future. Respondents do indeed have strong attachments to the idea of the "Library" but clearly expressed dissatisfaction with [the] service experience of the libraries they use.²

The Museum, Libraries, and Archives Council in the United Kingdom published a report in 2005 titled *Increasing the Attractiveness of Libraries for Adult Learners* by Catherine Shovlin of Customer Interpreter Ltd.³ Public libraries, contends the author, are not used by adult learners, especially those with lower socio-economic status and educational levels, because they have "simply forgotten" about libraries. Many of the United Kingdom respondents think that libraries are only about quiet and old books.

Some of the recommendations in the report focus on staff. One in particular urges library management and local government to allow the staff to give the service they want to. "Unleash their passion for serving their users and help them develop skills required for more proactive service giving."⁴ Other recommendations call for increasing marketing and improving the physical environment in ways similar to the OCLC results—better lighting, coffee, clear and accurate signage, and even aromatherapy to overcome the "library smell." In short, users and staff view libraries as educating, informing, entertaining, inspiring, empowering,

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continued on page 60

inclusive and safe, but non-users just do not see it that way. If non-users in the future radically outnumber or out-influence users, how will we attract the best and the brightest to work in libraries and how will we fund collections and services?

As we learn more about users and try to adapt our services accordingly, how does this change the roles and responsibilities of professional librarians? This issue of *LA&M* contains several articles about major changes in library organizations and their leadership, including the relationship of computing services to libraries and the wisdom of adopting the corporate model for public libraries. These articles help raise awareness about the need to re-evaluate and redesign libraries to enhance services and collections.

As a profession, we are very risk-averse. We hesitate to change what we do and how we do it. We fear breaking the traditional attachment users have to libraries without a guarantee that users and non-users will respond positively. As 2006 unfolds, we need a sense of urgency about our professional roles. We should heed the survey advice and market

our services to actively update the library brand. If we do not, our libraries will be increasingly pushed to the margin of the information-seeking world or forgotten altogether. This issue of *LA&M* and the OCLC and the United Kingdom reports challenge us to think differently about users and ourselves, and this seems to me to be a fine way to celebrate the New Year.

References

1. OCLC, *Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources: A Report to the OCLC Membership* (Dublin, Ohio: OCLC, 2005), www.oclc.org/reports/2005perceptions.htm (accessed Feb. 2, 2006).
2. *Ibid.*, 6-6.
3. Catherine Shovlin, *Increasing the Attractiveness of Libraries for Adult Learners* (London: Museum, Libraries, and Archives Council, 2005), www.mla.gov.uk/documents/id2100rep.pdf (accessed Feb. 2, 2006).
4. *Ibid.*, 3.

may want to refer to Bonnie Osif's "Manager's Bookshelf" column in this issue. Osif has done a splendid job exploring the current literature on the role of professionalism in librarianship.

Lastly, Antonia Olivas, reference and instruction librarian, and Henry McCurley, cataloging department chair, have provided a wonderful analysis of cross-training and cooperation at Auburn University Libraries. This particular model, unlike that in effect at Dickinson College, was developed in an ad hoc manner by staff at the university library. The authors note that a great deal of miscommunication had occurred in the past among different divisions simply because of the sheer size of their institution. "Working across Divisional Lines: How One Large University Library Cross Trains and Works As a Whole" describes how reference and technical services librarians decided to cross-train and work in a cooperative, nonhierarchical manner—truly a form of self-management that readers of John Lubans's column have been accustomed to hearing about. They write that:

What has made the experiment both possible and successful is the support of the library adminis-

tration, the willingness of the various unit and department heads to allow such working across administrative lines on an informal basis, and, most of all, a certain kind of library culture that caters to and nurtures experimental working environments. It is a culture based on mutual respect, willingness to teach and learn, and an implicit understanding that, while administrative units may be necessary, they should not be allowed to get in the way of devising ways to improve service.

Erratum:

In the last issue, Peter Pearson's e-mail address was incorrect. He can be reached at peterp@thefriends.org.

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