



President's Message

A Call to Leadership

Gail Kennedy

As I conclude my year as LLAMA's president, I am moved to issue a call to leadership to LLAMA members, as well as all librarians and supporters of libraries. Perhaps that is not surprising coming from an officer in the division of ALA whose mission is to encourage and nurture leaders. At this point in time, however, it is important to address the increased urgency for leadership in our profession.

I have been deeply immersed in the topic of leadership for the last couple of years. In LLAMA, I've focused on strategies for developing and supporting tomorrow's library leaders. At the same time, I've had a good vantage point for observing the recent pace of change in our field and the challenges, both present and on the horizon, facing the next generation of librarians. From that vantage point, I can say with certainty that the territory ahead is rugged, uncharted, and we are moving into it at breakneck speed.

Since Ben Franklin started his Library Company of Philadelphia in 1731, libraries have traditionally been revered as institutions for the common good. Librarians have been respected for their roles in preserving and providing information. But neither we, nor our institutions, are guaranteed survival in the rugged territory of the chaotic new world. This new world is a perfect storm--an unstable economy, public outcry for deep spending cuts, and exploding digital technology being mined by a variety of for-profit entrepreneurs.

Indicators of the uncomfortable environment we find ourselves in bombard us from all directions. We hear ominous predictions for budget cuts in library funding, there is mounting pressure on libraries to demonstrate their return on investment, we are confounded by slippery fair use parameters and frustrated by tricky new licensing for e-books and journals. And doesn't it seem that a new leading edge of technology emerges every month?

The March/April 2011 issue of [American Libraries](#) includes these messages from the front:

- In an article entitled "[President Obama's Budget Strips FY2012 funding](#)," ALA Executive Director Keith Michael Fiels says that Obama's proposed 9% budget reduction for IMLS is "dead on arrival" in the Republican House, which will propose even deeper cuts.

- In the [Trends](#) column: A discussion of HarperCollins decision to change its terms of service for libraries' e-book lending rights via "check out limits" of 26 on each e-book licensed, prompts a publisher to comment in his blog: "While libraries do a public good by expanding readership of an author's work, let's not overstate their success turning readership into income for authors and publishers."
- In "[One Librarian's Takeaway from the Consumer Electronics Show](#)," a self-described "technologist and librarian" discusses his recent experience at the ICE Show and urges the library community to watch the leading edge of technology so that "by the time these things become embedded in our patrons' lives it doesn't take us a decade to find a way to provide library services that they recognize."
- And, finally, two telling titles in the [book review section](#): [Being Indispensable: A School Librarian's Guide to Becoming an Invaluable Leader](#) is described as a "template" for school librarians "trying to save their jobs." And then there's [The Frugal Librarian: Thriving in Tough Economic Times](#), which offers a chapter on attending library conferences on \$40 a day, with tips on things such as signing up for free vendor sponsored food events.

Had I known I'd be dealing with these kinds of issues, I might have thought twice about becoming a librarian! The profession I entered upon receiving my master's in library science in 1974 looked very different than it does in 2011. In 1974 choices were straightforward. There were a few types of libraries in which you could work and within each, the jobs were well delineated. You could work in public services—either reference or circulation or that service area flourishing thanks to OCLC's new online union catalog, interlibrary loan. Your other option was technical services—acquisitions or cataloging. The technical services were the domain of librarians who purchased or cataloged behind the scenes. There were plenty of places to hide behind the scenes in librarianship. One of my early jobs was original cataloging of French language monographs. I could go days without emerging from my cube to interact with the world. Another was running collection inventories which involved weeks at a time sequestered in the book stacks. Acquisitions librarians spent time daily ordering books because there was lots of money to spend. The approval plan that was first offered by the Richard Abel Co. was a godsend because we could now automatically receive almost everything published in the subjects where we chose to be comprehensive. Acquisitions librarians could shift more time to the tedious job of searching for out of print books to purchase via letter and phone calls to their favorite OP dealers. Filing cards in the card catalog was a very serious assignment for a new cataloger. So careful were we to avoid misfiling catalog entries that we dropped red flags in front of every card we filed to allow another, more experienced, filer to come behind us to check our work, correct our mistakes and meticulously count our errors.

These may sound like stories from another planet to new librarians but this was the library of the world before OCLC had 1.7 billion holdings, before the integrated library system, the library in the era of plentiful funding and go-go acquisitions when collection size and budget were the only measures that mattered, the world in which professional library positions were predictable and plentiful. It was a comfortable, placid library world. And those adjectives will never be used to describe the library world again. We have moved from the 20th century characterized by a solid understanding of the civic and educational purpose of libraries and the role of librarians to a

chaotic 21st century characterized by a pervasive aura of instability—in our funding and in our role, purpose and mission.

From the downside of what appear to be some overwhelming challenges facing librarians, let's consider the upside viewpoint of what we can do to shape our own future in spite of a bevy of factors beyond our immediate control. Before Rahm Emanuel uttered the now iconic phrase, "[you never want a serious crisis to go to waste](#)," there were many other aphorisms about the opportunities that arise in the midst of threats. "A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty" is often attributed to Winston Churchill. And John F. Kennedy said, "[When written in Chinese, the word crisis is composed of two characters. One represents danger and the other represents opportunity.](#)" We are certainly facing difficulties and some danger but, at the same time, we are in a period of unprecedented opportunity.

The challenges that we are encountering with exploding communication and information technology offer us great opportunities, if we move swiftly, to take leadership roles on several fronts. Librarians have been invested in efficient and discerning use of the internet since it became widely popular in the 1990's. As our users began to discover the ease of surfing the net for access to tons of information, we began to analyze and assess this new approach to research. Early on, librarians sounded the alarm about the dangers of relying on undocumented information gleaned from casual internet searches. Our early investment in learning to use search engines so that we could guide our users to efficient research and trustworthy information has paid off. We librarians both understand the complexities of searching the internet and we want to help people find information they need. As information experts with a deep commitment to public service, we can be strong leaders in use of new technologies in information service.

Most research universities have or are establishing institutional repositories. Libraries have a great opportunity to assume leadership for these projects and, in so doing, provide value-added scholarly communication and intellectual property services. Some are suggesting that research libraries could become the scholarly publishers of the future, managing digital archives and providing open access to born digital publications. At Penn State, the [Office of Digital Scholarly Publishing](#) is a collaboration between Penn State Libraries and Penn State Press. This and other emerging models have broad implications as every university faces challenges in providing access to scholarly journals whose prices have become untenable.

Perhaps the toughest sow's ear to fashion into a silk purse is the climate of recurring budget cuts and the uncertainty of the financial picture in all areas—local, state, and national, public and private. What possible opportunities can we find in this dismal scenario? Let me suggest two. First we have the opportunity to use the budgetary crisis to reexamine our mission, goals, priorities and organizational structure. In times of comfort, we don't think of reinvention and complacency can settle in. Hard times make difficult choices imperative. Thoughtful decisions made in an atmosphere of openness and transparency may be accepted and supported because everyone understands the necessity of change. We have the opportunity make shifts

to new priorities and to discontinue or phase out practices that don't support the new priorities. It is really up to all of us, not just administrators, to play a role in leading organizational change.

A second approach to leveraging our sparse funding is building partnerships with like-minded individuals or groups. When everyone is well-funded it is tempting to go it alone or to collaborate on a somewhat superficial level. In times like these, we are all seriously in need of a little help from our friends to move initiatives forward. Libraries by their nature have always been collaborative and now we are finding a lot of groups interested in partnering with us to accomplish shared institutional and community goals. Alliances formed in times of need will in many cases endure and produce synergy that continues to strengthen both the individual partners and the partnership. The key is, don't wait to be asked. It is not uncommon for non-librarians to be quite unaware of the extent of our expertise and interests so we must be proactive in reaching out to potential partners.

There are an abundance of opportunities open to us in these challenging times, too many to cover here. Perhaps it is more important to be prepared to seize opportunities when they arise than to try to anticipate and categorize them. This is the foundation for the call to leadership. We are in the midst of one of the most dynamic and confusing times in the history of librarianship. We cannot rely on the public good will and benevolence we have enjoyed for the last 250 years to carry us forward. It is time to take a place at the table where decisions are being made about how and by whom information services will be delivered.

In LLAMA, we talk about leadership at all levels—not just leadership defined by an appointed or elected position—but leadership that takes a variety of forms in different situations. Many of us do not expect nor seek to join the ranks of management or run for office in professional associations. The lure of librarianship for my generation was often the prospect of serving in a quiet, independent and individual role. In today's world of constant change, expectations of multitasking and doing more with less, there is no room for the solitary librarian. All of us will be thrust into situations where we can and should lead.

This year's LLAMA theme is "unexpected leadership." What propels people to step into the void when expected leadership fails and what skills we can develop to enable us to be effective when we see the need to become leaders? At the ALA annual conference in New Orleans this June, we will use the Hurricane Katrina recovery as context for the topic of unexpected leadership in a crisis situation. The LLAMA President's Program will feature Tim Duggan of [Make It Right](#) (Brad Pitt's foundation rebuilding the lower 9th ward) speaking about the genesis of this amazing project and how its leaders are collaborating to sustain this humanitarian effort.

The crisis of Katrina presents a complex challenge which requires an array of leadership skills. In [my column for the most recent issue of LL&M](#), I cited the [Center for Creative Leadership's](#) findings of its 2007 examination of leadership during Katrina. Collaboration, adaptability, awareness of the environment, courage, risk-taking, co-inquiry, creativity and the ability to foster creativity in others, were identified as skills that help leaders navigate complex challenges.

The competencies required for complex challenge leadership are all part of the [four fundamental leadership](#) skills advanced by the Center for Creative Leadership. The way you address each skill and what you need to learn or emphasize will shift as you move to different roles and face new challenges. The Fundamental 4 are:

- **Self-awareness:** Understand your strengths and weaknesses
- **Communication:** Writing clearly, speaking with clarity and active listening are skills we need to develop and refine during our careers.
- **Learning agility:** Master the ability to constantly be in a learning mode, to value and seek out the lessons of experience.
- **Influence:** Influencing skills help you to communicate your vision or goals, align the efforts of others and build commitment from people at all levels

In conclusion, I suggest that everyone in our profession—librarians of all types, ages, and career stages—should hone their leadership skills. If you are just starting in your career, find mentors and resources that can help you. At this summer's ALA conference, LLAMA and the New Members Round Table will be co-hosting a program and discussion on the topic of how early career librarians can develop leadership skills. If you are in mid-career, assess your leadership skills and invest in improvement where you are lacking. If you are, like me, past mid-career, be fully engaged in sharing lessons of leadership, gained from both your successes and failures, with those to whom you are passing the torch.

In an [interview with American Libraries](#) last July, Thomas Frey, executive director and senior futurist at the DaVinci Institute, had a lot of advice about how libraries can position themselves to be relevant in the future but he ended with an encouraging note of approval, “. . . libraries are here to stay because they have a survival instinct. They have created a mutually dependent relationship with the communities they serve, and most importantly, they know how to adapt to the changing world around them.” It is our job as librarians of the 21st century to ensure that Thomas Frey's prediction is accurate. The future is hazy and the present is chaotic but oh so full of opportunity.

This column is an edited version of the author's Karen Cobb Memorial Lecture delivered on April 29, 2011, at the awards banquet of the University of Kentucky School of Library and Information Science where she received the 2011 Outstanding Alumna Award.

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