

LLAMA President's Message

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In September of 2016, the Pew Research Center released “Libraries 2016,” a report that detailed trends in public libraries and expectations that the public had regarding what their libraries should offer. It may come as no surprise that people assume that their libraries add to the fabric of their communities, and 66% of those surveyed believe that closing their local public library would have a major impact. This relatively strong belief that libraries play a vital role, though, is tempered by the fact that only 33% believe that closing their library would have a major impact on them and their families. While the brand of libraries appears strong, at the level of the individual institution and the personal impact that people perceive, that brand is not quite as robust as we might hope. People love the concept of libraries, but do they truly know the full range of everything that the libraries they support, whether through taxes, tuition, or fees, offer and how it might be utilized in their own lives? As this is my final “President’s Message,” I thought it appropriate to look to the future and give my take on what I believe will be the challenges and opportunities that we will face as library leaders in the years ahead, and this seeming paradox (libraries are necessary for my community even if they aren’t necessary for me...) is central to that.

Since the dawn of the digital age, there have been continual questions regarding the nature of libraries and the services they offer, and libraries find themselves in the difficult position of balancing traditional collections with a plethora of new media and content. Cherished philosophical underpinnings of librarianship, such as the concept of neutrality, are now being reexamined, and others, such as social justice librarianship, are starting to emerge. When I

graduated from the University of Illinois with my MSLIS twenty years ago, libraries shirked from being labeled as a social service, but we now find libraries actively pursuing activities that can only be described as social work. We are not alone in being forced to rapidly evolve to suit the changes that have affected society, but has it become more and more difficult to succinctly define the word “library” in a way that can encapsulate what we do and what is expected of us? What is the “message” of a library to the community it serves? Do libraries have a unified purpose that our users could explain or are they a collection of disparate services that are loosely tied together—an adaptation of the sprawling physical collections that used to define us to a sprawling collection of possible interactions that our users might experience? If the latter, is it possible to maintain an identity or have we successfully transitioned to providing unified places of connection to the vast and ever-increasing array of offerings we provide?

Evolution, finding organizational focus, the discernment of purpose, and the creation of structures more responsive to those they serve are all things with which LLAMA—after what, by ALA standards, can only be described as a lightning-fast transformation over the past year—has some recent experience. As an association, we have taken a giant step in truly defining what our purpose is for our members, what services we should offer, and how our members can best interact with each other in productive ways. Many of the questions that faced LLAMA in the past and led to our reorganization are similar to those that we face in our own professional work. As current and future library leaders, it is now incumbent upon us to answer those questions for our profession and our own institutions, as well. I will end with one final thought: the answers to these questions are not nearly as important as our ability to clearly explain them in a way that makes sense to the communities we serve and provides a single message that can define what we do and why we do it.

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