
Discovering college libraries

By Caroline M. Coughlin

Associate Director
Drew University Library

Idea-sharing as a survival strategy.

William Moffitt's theme address at the 1984 Seattle ACRL meeting pinpoints some of the concerns of college librarians who often endure a nagging sense of being in the minors given the historic American tendency to equate bigness with achievement. According to Moffett:

"Being small in American academia means living with that terminal question [long-term survival].

"Being small in American academia means being ineligible for many research grants, being nosed aside from the trough of many federal and state subsidies.

"Being small means limited resources for capital improvements; it means being hard-pressed to buy the instruments essential for first-class instruction in analytic chemistry.

"Being small in academia means having difficulty attracting and sustaining the ablest teachers and librarians and providing adequate opportunities for personal development for both faculty and staff throughout their careers. . . .

"Being small in academia often means a lack of social and cultural diversity. . . .

"In our country size confers authority, prestige, legitimacy: the big time! the major leagues! the super bowl!"¹

Moffitt analyzes some of the impact of a national

¹William A. Moffett, "Reflections of a College Librarian: Looking for Life and Redemption This Side of ARL," in Suzanne C. Dodson and Gary L. Menges, eds., *Academic Libraries: Myths and Realities*, Proceedings of the Third National Conference of the Association of College and Research Libraries, April 4-7, 1984, Seattle (Chicago: ACRL, 1984), pp.37-46.

preoccupation with largeness on the ongoing work of academic librarians. This brief essay will add another dimension to that address and to the ongoing dialogue about "small is beautiful" issues that Schumacher presented in *Small Is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*.

In addition to effects of smallness listed by Moffitt such as poverty and insecurity there is still another. The smallness of most college library operations makes their successes difficult to see and share. Our knowledge of college libraries is therefore incomplete. It is this limited view which may foster a lack of self-respect and inappropriate or unnecessary envy of research librarians among college librarians. Perceptions about college libraries are flawed because the college library story is incomplete. Small may indeed be beautiful, but we just do not know the necessary facts. Schumacher has argued that there is wisdom in smallness if only on account of the smallness and patchiness of human knowledge which relies on experiment far more than understanding.²

Using simple techniques that are based on that fine old custom of library visiting, college librarians could dispel this ignorance. A system of observer report exchanges could foster growth in actual knowledge and perhaps a sense of real worth and community among the nation's college librarians.

As part of the ongoing work of updating the 1973 edition of Guy R. Lyle's *The Administration of the*

²E.F. Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful: Economics As If People Mattered* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1973), p.33.

College Library I regularly visit college libraries and discuss library concerns and issues with library directors, staff and other campus personnel. Most of my interview notes are on the substantive issues of governance, faculty status, collection development, the introduction of new technologies and the like. However there is also another category of information in my file which, for want of a better term, may be called service refinements. Most of these additional services and activities are variations on programs of public relations, employee motivation, information and referral services and other basics.

Some may be labor intensive to perform but are not particularly expensive to institute. Others would be options to consider if renovation funds were available. Although none of these refinements is of the magnitude to change the direction of a college library, all add luster to an already sound program. The sad fact is that the great majority of these small good ideas remain in the shadows or are unknown. In my visits to over fifty colleges I have observed many small, useful embellishments that have not been shared. Replication of clearly evident good practices is surprisingly limited.

For example, I observed students at an OCLC LIBS 2000 test site express real pleasure at being asked to write comments about search strategies on the experimental terminal in a notebook near the terminal and suggest how the system might be improved. The eagerness to communicate about the system's peculiarities reveals more than a Hawthorne effect among the experimental group. It is the ability to share mastery of the system that seems most appealing to the people who write comments. A similar notebook could be placed near a card catalog and might result in many improvements. It is quite possible that a notebook has been so used somewhere. It is also possible that a visitor to the innovating library saw the idea and initiated it elsewhere. And there the matter is usually ended. While the emerging technology of online systems offers more interactive options than a notebook, a catalog notebook could have made life easier for many generations of college students who wanted to interact with their college library card catalog and catalogers.

There are too many of these small, good ideas that get away. College librarianship is not so overwhelmed with innovations that it can afford to lose them.

Many college libraries have a new book display shelf or area near the entrance. One college library visited recently also had bulletin boards in stack areas with new book jackets pinned on them. Obviously both types of libraries were promoting reading but in the second example there was an extra vitality to the promotion. Publicity about new books went past the spotlight of the entrance and followed the user throughout the stacks, encouraging reading all the way. This idea deserves the flattery of imitation.

In another institution, a staff-only area features a homemade snapshot gallery of student assistants. Under each individual's photograph is the appropriate information: name, major, year of graduation and hometown. Permanent staff use the gallery regularly to learn new student staff and as aids in monitoring performance. Although all college libraries cannot have the Oberlin College Library

Too many small, good ideas get away.

gallery of famous librarian alumnae, each can use photographs to build more community and motivation at home.

In another institution the comments on the answer board near the suggestion box had a unique tone. The director answers all queries and does so in a manner that heavily promotes the role of the library director as an accessible campus personality to students. Answers are segued with questions and the resulting dialogue is a blend of *National Lampoon* and a serious information exchange. It takes a flair for writing as well as a belief that the library director also serves as a senior professor-advisor to all students to sustain this dialogue.

Good building maintenance and attractive furnishings are two obvious program requirements for a college library. One variation on this ongoing necessity is Evan Farber's innovation at the Earlham College Library. He created a senior art contest and prize. The winning entries become the property of the library for use in decoration. When hung they also contribute a positive sense of student ownership of library space. Such a sense of ownership enhances respect for property and assists the library staff in its maintenance efforts.

Some ideas even though small cost something to implement. One library purchased a series of tapes on health topics and placed them near a tape recorder and phone in the reserve area. A person may call and request a particular tape, perhaps the one on exam anxiety, or quitting smoking, and it is played. If the campus student life office is offering such a service there is no need for the library to compete. If no such counseling service exists and the tapes could be purchased in support of other curricular needs it is not too difficult to extend their use.

Another library has a wall in its lobby on which is projected a daily calendar of campus events. It uses a screen and an overhead projector but a computer terminal can be equally effective.

Technical creativity is currently rampant as college librarians adapt personal computers to their administrative and bibliographical needs. With

these innovations one obvious question emerges. Can a system for sharing such information be developed? Could such an information exchange system keep track of the other service refinements invented by college librarians?

At present the field has only imperfect methods and media for learning about these modest successes. Most learning is personal and is based on the serendipitous visit of one librarian to another library. A good idea is recognized and transplanted to the second library. It then goes no further. In a country with 4,900 academic libraries spread over 50 states it is impossible for someone to visit only those with similar objectives and structure, let alone all 4,900. Individual librarians cannot devote their careers to gathering and disseminating the good ideas of the year. A network based on sharing library visits may be a simple first step to the solution of this problem.

Information gathered during library visits, that is the visit of one librarian to another library, has never been recorded in the annals of librarianship. Often such visits are solitary experiences and only the visitor knows what was learned. One is reminded of a cataloger's life before shared cataloging through networks. Some of the same pre-network cataloging difficulties of reliability, replicability and cost effectiveness need to be considered for library visits and a system for library visits designed.

"I always learn something when I visit another library" is a phrase as familiar and as true as "the right book for the right reader at the right time." Folk wisdom is clearly institutionalized when librarians planning new buildings visit the latest crop of similar buildings and take back to their campus knowledge about what to imitate and what to avoid in their building. Other visits have much less focus. Casual visits may result in the visiting librarians only learning about the quality of the coffee in various meeting rooms. Somewhere between the two extremes lies the field's beloved but random, unreported one-way communication event, a library visit.

At first glance a library visit report seems to be another "how I do it good" article. Further reflection on the custom of library visiting and on its potential for becoming a system that can be identified as observer report exchanges reveals important differences.

First, systematic library visit reports can be more objective. It is the disinterested observer, not the creator of a given program, who is making judgments about the usefulness and worth of a particular activity. The pitfalls of excess humility or bragging that may limit the report of the idea creator are avoided by the use of observers. Second, observer reports, especially if structured reports are collected by a team of visitors or as seen through a variety of reports over time, offer a much wider sample for study. Thus, observer reports based on an improved and more systematic sharing of the

widespread custom of library visiting could be a useful contribution to knowledge about libraries.

The techniques could be simple. One person with concerns, knowledge and questions in a given specialty visits five libraries and summarizes the findings for others. Twenty people with the same or distinct concerns can organize themselves to visit 100 libraries. There could be an agreed interview form to aid in making comparisons. The reporting medium may be oral. The group organizing the above system may share their findings at an annual informal meeting. Two principles, informed observation and regular sharing of results, should dominate any design. There can be many different systems for sharing the information.

If a published report results, the literature represented by ALA's Office for Library Personnel Resources *TIP Notes*, ACRL's *CLIP Notes*, and the Association of Research Libraries *SPEC Kits* are models for consideration. Or, a column in *C&RL News* may be more appropriate. The new ALANET electronic mail system is another possibility. One could poll members to discover preferences prior to any publication.

The College Libraries Section of ACRL is a possible home for a project of this nature if the Section wishes to give the idea shelter and support. If it does not, there is no barrier to any other group adopting the idea and modifying it to support the particular interests of the group.

Task Force needs feedback

The Strategic Planning Task Force is interested in your comments on the ACRL planning process as described in *C&RL News*, September 1984, pp.396-401.

What areas would you like to see improved?

How would you change things to improve that situation?

What should ACRL's priorities be?

The Task Force needs your suggestions. One way to bring them to the attention of the Association is to come to the ACRL President's Program in Chicago on Monday, July 8, 2:00-5:30 p.m. This will be the culmination of President Sharon Rogers's efforts to determine what ACRL members want in their Association. It will be a working session, where members in small groups will debate Association priorities under the guidance of over 100 trained discussion leaders. The results will form an important part of the Task Force's data as they carry out activities and resource planning and carry out ACRL's strategic plan.

Or you may address your suggestions to the Chair of the Task Force, Susan Klingberg, Head, Education and Psychology Reference Department, California State University Library, 2000 Jed Smith Drive, Sacramento, CA 95819; (916) 454-6776.

As Schumacher says,³ we need the freedom of

³Schumacher, *ibid.*, p.61.

lots and lots of small autonomous units, and at the same time the orderliness of large-scale—possibly global—unity and coordination. ■■

ACRL issues for the 80s

ACRL's two presidential candidates offer their views on the Association's future.



Thomas Kirk



Hannelore Rader

This presentation of statements from ACRL's candidates for vice-president/president-elect is an information service for ACRL members. Many of the issues and concerns facing ACRL are discussed informally at meetings, but this does not provide a national forum available to all members. These statements provide the basis for an informed choice when you receive your ballot next month.—*Sharon J. Rogers, ACRL president.*

Thomas Kirk:

I have just returned from Washington, D.C., where I participated in the activities and meetings of the Midwinter meeting of the American Library Association. As I write this statement of candidacy my thoughts of those meetings are very much on my mind. ACRL is a vital and active organization. The many committees, task forces, and sections of the Association are hard at work addressing important professional and organizational issues. The planning process which our recent ACRL presidents began is well underway and we can expect to

see the fruits of that effort in the coming years. In addition to ACRL organizational planning I observed many committees focusing on professional concerns such as College Library Standards, a new model statement on bibliographic instruction, library legislation, and the planning of programs for this and next year's annual conferences, to name just a few.

In the context of ACRL's strength I believe that my task, should I be elected, is to see that the planning effort already underway is completed. In the past I have watched the noble planning efforts of one president get lost when they left office. I believe we have a good effort underway and I am committed to seeing that planning process continue during my tenure.

There is one aspect of the Association which has not received much attention and I believe will need serious consideration over the next few years. That issue is how to best represent the concerns and interests which are primarily those of a particular type of library. The reorganization of the ACRL Board of Directors, if approved by the membership, and other proposed changes in ACRL will weaken the role of the type-of-library sections within ACRL. But I am not interested in just preserving those sections. Instead I want the Association to explore and experiment with ways of strengthening members' participation in activities and programs which focus on type-of-library concerns. ACRL must not lose the capacity to speak effectively for the interests of a particular type of academic or research library.

The Association, however, should not spend all its energies on organizational concerns. ACRL has as its mission "the enhancement of library service, in the broadest sense, to the academic and research