

# Publish or perish?

## Looking at publication for tenure from the other side of the street

by Rodger C. Lewis

For academic librarians, the emphasis on publication gradually became a major factor for their promotion and/or tenure during the late 50s and early 60s, as colleges and universities continued to expand with government grants and G.I. tuition money.

Librarians, often with two master's degrees, began to feel resentment about their ostensibly subaltern position in relation to the faculty on many U.S. campuses. Salaries were the major issue, but reimbursement for travel and attendance at meetings, sabbaticals, and free time for professional reading were among the other advantages sought.

Many librarians believed that identification with the teaching faculty was the fast track to this cornucopia of blessings. Others, agreeing that a more equitable wage was justified, felt they were already in a time-honored profession, as old as the oldest university; they wished to retain their separateness from the teaching faculty and did not feel demeaned by being included as "staff" with many administrative positions.

History shows this latter view was less persuasive. But on many campuses there were a couple of interesting bumps on that road to a new identity: the teaching fac-

ulty began to feel threatened by the possibility of having to share whatever wealth and privilege there might be with a larger group, and they objected vociferously; the technical services librarians realized that the public service librarians, in their attempt to take on a new identity, were emphasizing their instructional contact with students and their assistance to professors at the expense of the clever people in the back room, so a break in the ranks occurred that threatened to derail the movement.

Both of these objections were resolved when the professors found themselves needing more bodies to establish a strong union, and the librarians united under the concept of research and publication.

### A carrot-on-a-stick?

Faculty status and/or tenure for librarians has thus become a popular carrot-on-a-stick, if not a norm, in academic libraries. But in order to achieve this prominence, librarians are constantly reminded that the measure for their achievement is (and not a few professors enjoy the irony in this): publication, publication, publication.

The result has been, if not a Faustian bargain, at least a *comédie humaine* in which the players often are not perform-

#### About the author

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ing the tasks they are best equipped to perform, but they are obliged to delegate many of those duties to a lower echelon to emulate the “publish or perish” frenzy of the teaching faculty. It is a policy that has hidden costs and negative consequences well beyond, I suspect, what was anticipated by those seeking only a little more money and prestige.

### The ironies

In those institutions where tenure is required for continuing employment, the position advertisements are more often than not a testimony to the hypocrisy of the current mandates: the ads describe recognizable qualifications for librarianship, but what is actually required is a person who knows the language of the trade, but who must delegate much of the actual work to a subordinate—a paraprofessional—while the librarian is engaged in grasping for the brass ring of tenure. This means attending meetings, performing community service, and getting published. This latter category is the dominant area which, under the guise of research, may account for as much as 80% of the person's evaluation. It has become the *sine qua non* for enjoying (and one may question the use of that word) faculty status.

Another irony of the “publish or perish” syndrome, which should occur to anyone who has been involved in serial cancellation projects as budgets become tighter, is the fact that concomitant with the need to publish on the part of all faculty, is the increase of publications to accommodate these writers. We are encouraging the proliferation of journals to provide space for tenure-driven articles, while we are canceling subscriptions because of budget constraints! What's wrong with this picture?

### Publication is useful, not mandatory

Regularly scanning much of the library literature during the past 30 years, I have to conclude that libraries would have done just as well had the majority of the articles never been written. This opinion is not as subjective as some might wish.

Recently, Alan M. Edelson, retired president and CEO of J. B. Lippincott, lamenting the proliferation of journals with the consequential decline of quality, said, “It appears

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to me that a not insignificant proportion of the journals rolling off the presses today contain a not insignificant proportion of articles that the scholarly and scientific world could well live without. . . .

“Perhaps he/she ought to have delayed publishing anything until . . . a more significant insight could be realized. Unfortunately this is unrealistic for most authors who, under our current systems, must frequently document their activities to obtain research grants or tenure or both.”<sup>1</sup>

This lament has been echoed by others on both sides of the publishing industry and is frequently a topic on various electronic discussion lists. The redundancy of subject matter is obvious, and some technical proposals, for example, have such limited application as to be *sui generis* on a minor scale. Many of the utilitarian or provocative topics that do get printed are as readily available, and in greater detail, from discussion groups or informal dialogue with colleagues.

Zachary Karabell calls attention to the fact that state governments are once again trying to limit or deny tenure altogether because it is taking the teacher out of the classroom. Librarians ought to be aware that, as money becomes tighter, legislators and administrators may conclude that a university library can be adequately staffed by more paraprofessionals and fewer certified librarians—not because the former are better qualified, but because they are there everyday getting the actual work done, while the latter are spending time insuring their own careers.<sup>2</sup>

They surely will perceive, too, that acquisitions costs have skyrocketed, partly due to the proliferation of journals generated by this need to publish. Digitizing is not in itself a solution and generates sufficient controversy to be a subject for another time and place.

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Many academic libraries have placed such an emphasis on publishing that all new librarians are enrolled in committees in which topics for research are suggested, various avenues to publication are recommended, and encouragement, if not enthusiasm, is sustained by personal success stories; more time away from the work.

Publication is, and has been, useful, but it need not be mandatory. Librarians are just as valuable because of their technical skills, subject specialties, and ability to mediate between the classroom and the collection. When a student or professor seeks assistance from a librarian, he or she has no interest in whether that librarian has published; what is required is someone who listens well and is able to translate a frequently ambiguous or garbled need into a structured search of a database

or of a collection that has been assiduously developed, monitored, and cataloged.

In a world of overspecialization, librarians may still be generalists (as opposed to the narrower and slicker term "information specialist"). They are then invaluable as mediators between the humble student or the prestigious professor and the worldwide collection of information (as opposed to "data").

I believe we are about to experience a revolution in which the classroom teacher and the "library's librarian" will achieve equal appreciation in every sense from the administration and from their peers. Equalize the benefits for the theorist and the practitioner, and let each do the job he or she does best.

### Notes

1. Alan Edelson, "Re: Electronic availability," message to Liblicense-L Discussion List at liblicense-l@lists.yale.edu on October 14, 1999. Archived at <http://www.library.yale.edu/~llicense/ListArchives/9910/msg00017.html>.

2. Zachary Karabell, *What's College for?: The Struggle to Define American Higher Education* (New York: Basic Books, 1998). ■

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2. Nancy R. McAdams, "Trends in Academic Library Facilities," *Library Trends* 36, 2 (Fall 1987): 289.

3. Jay K. Lucker, "Library Buildings: Their Current State and Future Development," *Sci-Tech Libraries of the Future* 13, 1 (Fall 1992): 4.

4. Walt Crawford, "Paper Persists: Why Physical Library Collections Still Matter." *Online* 22, 1 (Jan.-Feb. 1998): 42-48.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Peter Lyman, "What is a Digital Library?" *Books, Bricks, & Bytes, Daedalus* (Fall 1996): 12.

8. Richard J. Bazillon and Connie Braun, *Academic Libraries as High-Tech Gateways* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1995): 19.

9. Marilyn Gell Mason, "The Yin and Yang of Knowing," *Books, Bricks, & Bytes, Daedalus* (Fall 1996): 165.

10. Ibid., 167.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid., 170. ■

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*("Library buildings . . ." continued from page 591)*

If a book provides contexts, so do libraries. Their existence provides a sense of past and present and implies that "there is more to the study of philosophy than a book by Kant, more to the study of science than an article on geophysics. . . . By their space and substance they provide a sensory understanding that knowledge is broader than any one subject field. . . . It is this sensory understanding that we often forget when we discuss information. Humans are more than a collection of electrical impulses.

"Learning, knowing, takes place on many levels. . . . There is something we know about knowledge when we walk in a library that we do not know when we sit at a computer terminal."<sup>13</sup>

### Notes

1. David L. Marcus "File this under shock, future," *U.S. News & World Report* (July 12, 1999): 48.