Jason Martin

The art of librarianship

Thoughts on leadership skills for next generation of academic library leaders

This article was originally a presentation at the Florida Library Association's 2008 Annual Conference.

Previous research has found that 40% of librarians are set to retire by 2014, and much has been made of this impending crisis in librarianship.[1] With the recent economic downturn it is unclear if that number, 40%, will hold true. But the economy will eventually take a turn for the better, and, when that happens, retirement will once again become an option for many Boomer librarians. Not only will these retirements lead to a shortage of librarians, but also to a shortage of librarians who are willing and able to take on leadership positions in academic libraries. The course of action routinely suggested is for libraries to groom their own new leaders.[2] But what skills should these new leaders possess? Many inventories of skills needed by next generation academic library leaders are simply a repackaging of the skills possessed by current library leaders. However, academic libraries are currently in a state of flux.[3]

As Anthony Grafton explains, academic libraries are feeling the strains of the rising cost of electronic resources, a lack of space to house the ever increasing number of print publications, and both faculty and students who now perform the majority of their research in a location other than the library.[4] This has created, in Grafton's words, "a time of shaking, if not breaking, what had seemed permanent institutions of unquestioned value."[5]

It would seem that in order to better navigate these rough seas, academic library leaders will need different skills than those of their predecessors. *The Art of War* was written more than 2,000 years ago by Sun Tzu, a "Chinese philosopher-warrior."[6] It is a book of strategy that informs the reader on how to navigate through conflict. The book is widely read in the both the East and the West by political, military, and business leaders. It is also used by those who wish to apply the Taoist wisdom of Sun Tzu to their personal lives. Using *The Art of War,* I have highlighted several skills I think will be necessary for the next generation of academic library leaders.

Change leadership

"Leadership is a matter of intelligence, trustworthiness, humaneness, courage, and sternness."

This is a great definition of leadership. In one sentence Sun Tzu sums up everything that any leader must have. This is especially true for library leaders in the coming years. It will come as no shock that libraries will face great change in the coming years, but not the change that is normally written about in the literature. Academic libraries have lately focused on bringing students to the library by providing more computers, non-quiet floors with group study areas, and more comfortable chairs near the espresso machine. While these changes are important in their own ways, they do not begin to address the fundamental changes libraries must face; changes in what a library is and how

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it goes about its day. Libraries will always survive, but it is of great question as to how well they will thrive without core change. To implement these changes a leader must have intelligence in order to make the proper changes, be trustworthy (no one follows an untrustworthy leader in unsure times), demonstrate humaneness towards the people undergoing the changes, posses the courage needed to make the changes, and sternness so that the change is seen through. Making and managing these fundamental changes will be an important part of the future academic library leader's job.

Advocacy

"Those who use the military skillfully do not raise troops twice and do not provide food three times."

Again it should be no great surprise that libraries will face shortages of resources in the future. When have libraries, or institutes of higher education, ever been overfunded? It is not so much the actual dollars spent on higher education, but the mindset of many state governments toward higher education. Higher education is the single largest discretionary item in state budgets. Schools often feel a disproportionate cut of funds in bad times, but increasingly have seen their funding cut in good times.[7] In 1974, state funding covered 78% of college costs, in 2000 it was just 43%.[8] States now are more reluctant than ever to fund higher education. The recent cuts faced by state universities during the country's economic downturn have been devastating, but even in better economic times funding for higher education in many states was stagnant, and it is to hard imagine a drastic upswing in funding once the economy rebounds. As less and less money is available, library leaders must be adept at advocacy to ensure proper funding. Advocacy is usually a term associated with public libraries, but it will become a much bigger factor in academic libraries. Academic libraries can not sit back and wait for state legislatures, university presidents, and provosts to realize how important libraries are and how much money libraries need.

Academic library leaders need to advocate for their libraries and stress the benefits of a well-funded, quality library. The library is the starting point for any and all research, and research brings notoriety and money to the campus. Without a proper library, the faculty can not engage in the type of research needed to support a top-notch university. Libraries are also vital in the support of students and their continued academic success.

Creating strong libraries

"In ancient times skillful warriors made themselves invincible, and then watched for vulnerability in their own opponents."

"So it is that good warriors take their stand on ground where they cannot lose, and do not overlook conditions that make an opponent prone to defeat."

Of course every department on campus will be advocating, so libraries need to stand on ground where they can not lose. This is not an easy task. It means developing a strong vision of the library and instituting a strong mission and goals that are re-evaluated periodically. It also means assessing the services currently being offered and determining what works and what does not work. It does not mean looking solely to the past to determine the future. It does not mean exclaiming, "But that is not what a library is suppose to be!" But rather asking, "What is it a library can become?" By ridding the library of underused or ineffective services, leaders can make the academic library stronger and enhance it by using the extra time, money, and human resources to bolster the current services that are important and working. So how does one set about to accomplish this?

"Act after having made assessments. The one who first knows the measures of far and near wins—this is the rule of armed struggle."

Library leaders need to focus on collecting and assessing data. Evidence Based Library and Information Practice (EBLIP) is an important movement within the library profession. Too much of what is done in libraries is done because that is simply the way it is

done. Methods of delivery or services once effective may no longer be effective in the current environment and with the current library patrons. Some services may never have worked properly. In order to make libraries stronger and better, library leaders must first know what works and what does not. Evidence based practice is an effective model that is widely used in medicine, education, and the social sciences.[9] Evidence-based practice first appeared in the library literature in 1995, and is closely tied with assessment. At its heart EBLIP seeks to answer questions with research, then uses the findings to inform decision making.[10] In other words, research is used to determine which practices and services are the best for the library and its users. Reference desk staffing is one way in which EBLIP may be used simply.

Reference librarians record the number and types of questions received during the hours the desk is open. The statistics are then examined to determine which times are the busiest and need more librarians, and which times need less staffing or none at all. This allows for a librarian's time to be used more effectively. This concept can be applied, albeit in more complex ways, to other areas of librarianship, like collection development, interlibrary loan, and library instruction.[11]

Skilled at the unorthodox

"Therefore those that are skilled at the unorthodox are infinite as heaven and earth, inexhaustible as the great rivers. When they come to an end, they begin again, like the days and months; they die and are reborn, like the four seasons."

As was stated earlier, it is time to re-vision libraries to rethink what they are and what they can do. Academic library leaders need to be strong advocates for their library and work to strengthen their libraries through assessment. But to be skilled at the unorthodox just might be the single greatest leadership skill needed for future library leaders. A new generation of library leaders must be able to meld the traditional notion of the library with the new, exciting notions of what an academic library can be. This means creating an environment where physical books and bound journals share space with the latest technologies.

Library leaders must be able to balance the need for special collections and other physical items with the needs of remote users. It will not be easy to appease the patrons who use the library for its first editions of Nietzsche, as well as those who use it almost exclusively to update their Facebook accounts, but it can be done. It will require the academic library leaders of tomorrow to possess special and unorthodox skills.

Notes

1. Jana Sheardown and Monique Woroniak, "'Mind the Gap': Future Librarians Preparing to Take on Leadership Roles, *Feliciter* 53, no. 2 (2007): 64–65.

2. Heather Matheson, "Promoting for Change: New Academic Librarians in Managerial Roles," *Feliciter* 53, no. 2 (2007): 70–72.

3. "Gen X Bites Back," *American Libraries* 35 no. 8 (2004): 43-45.

4. Anthony Grafton, "Apocalypse in the Stacks? The Research Library in the Age of Google," *Daedalus*, 138 no. 1 (2009): 87–98.

5. Ibid., p. 97.

6. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War,* trans. Thomas Cleary (Boston: Shambhala, 1988).

7. Michael Rizzo, "State Preferences for Higher Education Spending: A Panel Data Analysis, 1977-2001," in *What's Happening to Public Higher Education?,* ed. Ronald Ehrenberg (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2006), 3-35.

8. Ibid, p. 4.

9. Lindsay Glynn "Defending Evidence Based Practice," *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice,* 2 no. 2 (2007): 1–2.

10. Pam Ryan, "EBL and Library Assessment: Two Solitudes?" *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice,* 1 no. 4 (2006): 1–2.

11. For more information see the journal Evidence Based Library and Information Practice, ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/EBLIP. ✄