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Patrons, Patron Saints, and Pew

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Patrons, Patron Saints, and Pew

St. Jerome, the patron saint of librarians (and of translators and archivists), worried that he, a man of towering faith and obedience, would be found wanting at the end of his days. So taken was he with the literature of his day that he worried that he would be found more a “Ciceronian” than a Christian. In one of his letters to a correspondent, Eustochium, Jerome tells the story of spending much of his time reading Cicero, in lieu, one supposes, of the Scriptures, to the extent that he would fast simply in order to be able to read him. Indeed, he could give up anything, he remarked, but the library he had built for himself in Rome. When he presented himself at the so-called pearly gates, he claimed to be a follower of Christ. Alas, he was barred from entering, as the voice of God boomed out, calling him a liar and a follower of Cicero, not a follower of Christ. Jerome, thankfully, then woke from his nightmare.

I recall the story because it strikes me as emblematic of what is at the heart of libraries. Those of us who work these intellectual mines fill our buildings with the good, the bad, and the ugly of human endeavor, preserving all that chronicles everything that is right about us, and all that may well be wrong with us. If ever libraries were more torn between two lovers, as it were, it is now, when we are pressed on every side to be all things to all kinds of people. The question is, will it ever be enough? Will we be found wanting by the very patrons we seek to serve?

Yes, and no. The **Pew** folks who do a wonderful job of tracking what’s going on in libraries today released another report about libraries, patrons, and library usage (<http://www.pewinternet.org/2016/04/07/libraries-and-learning/>). On the one hand, patrons say we are doing a pretty good job (the **Pew** folks term it a “decent” one) of serving the educational and learning needs of our communities. Seventy-six percent say libraries do that job “very well” or “pretty well.” Moreover, 71% of our patrons say that libraries serve them and their families, again, very well, or pretty well.

Those who use us regularly tend to think of themselves as “lifelong learners,” and that’s another feather in our caps, another filigreed bookmark for our pages. Those of us who work in libraries would like nothing more than to be thought of as helping others become lifelong learners. Of those who have used a library or a bookmobile in the past year, 97% (“very well” or “pretty well”) of them think of themselves as lifelong learners. A whopping 98% of those who regularly use library portals say this term — lifelong learners — applies to them also. All this sounds like libraries are well on the way to reestablishing themselves as the intellectual cynosure of every community, and reclaiming ground lost over the years as noted in previous surveys. All is very well, or pretty well, right?

Not quite. It's after all this that things begin to get a little mephitic, or, well, the pee-yew part of this post. In 2012, only 53% of all those surveyed had visited a library or a bookmobile in the past twelve months. In the most recent survey, that number is down to 44%. Those using library portals have gone up from 25% to 31% in 2015, but only one percentage point increase since the last such survey in 2013. In other words, things have leveled off. Many of those surveyed are still not fully aware of what libraries have (for example, in addition to books, eBooks, laptops, career counselling materials, etc.), of services they offer, how they can better the lives of those who use them, and much more.

Although we have a captive audience in academic libraries, our usage depends largely on what faculty assign and how much library research is required by those assignments. Usage among undergraduates has changed with the advent of electronic access. But even with electronic access, higher usage doesn't always follow. Moreover, faculty continue to use us, but in falling numbers, many of them relying on other avenues or portals to address their needs.

Anecdotally, the usage in the academic library I am privileged to work in continues to increase. We have, however, noted a growing reliance in our building on group study and social collaboration. This isn't a bad thing necessarily. But when even a medium-size library turns into an out-sized study hall, a redoubling of efforts must be made if for no other reason than to placate the bean-counters.

The professional literature continues to push marketing on us, and marketing is certainly important. Higher education is awash now in marketing schemes, some of which have been found to be more than wanting after millions have been spent. But most academic libraries are still recovering from the 2008 economic downturn and dollars are scarce when present at all in quantities enough to be counted. I suspect many librarians find themselves in the unenviable position of knowing that if they choose to buy X they are not going to be able to afford Y. Consequently, a marketing budget is not really a line item, however much it may be needed.

Couple all this with the downturn in students choosing a four-year degree and the picture gets very murky very quickly. While 18-22 year olds may still want to spend four or five...or six years pursuing a college degree, Mom and Dad may not want to pay for it. To be honest, not many of those 18-22 year olds may want to, either. With most students incurring a minimum of \$20,000 in debt on graduation (in many places nationwide it's much higher), some sort of apprenticeship looks more and more inviting, especially if it ends in a steady, even modestly well-paying job. In the Palmetto State the average college debt is \$29,163 with almost 60% of all graduates incurring that debt (<http://ticas.org/posd/map-state-data-2015>).

Meanwhile, the cost of scholarly communication continues to rise, open access slogs along going somewhere but where is unclear. Personnel costs mount, and healthcare costs are not only increasing, but so also is the burden to be shared by states and those covered. Then there is that factor no one talks about much anymore: the greying of the professoriate. Although it's true that many in the professoriate will work not only beyond age 65 but even beyond age 70, the eventual reality is that the huge numbers of faculty hired in 1960s and 1970s will step down. Whether we like it or not, that will open the door for many changes to occur. While we await that eventuality, state legislators, parents and taxpayers are calling on higher education, its practices and its practitioners, to give an account of their reasons for being.

Frankly, when it's all added up, the good news and the not so good news, even the most agnostic library lovers among us may be led to utter a cry to St. Jerome.