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Shifting Sands

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Little Red Herrings — Shifting Sands

by Mark Y. Herring (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University) <herringm@winthrop.edu>

*My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains: round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

Are we witnessing the shifting sands of a “colossal wreck,” or is it just the settling of a foundation that will correct itself in due course? This year, 2015, is one of the banner years for baby boomers reaching the age of 65. Over the next five years, scores of librarians will reach or exceed that threshold. We’ve known this for some time now. We also know that not as many young librarians are replacing the hoary-headed as rapidly as those hoary heads are leaving.

In other words, library staffs are getting ... more and more mature, let us say, because no one is going anywhere. With the exception of deans, directors, and a few department heads, everyone is digging in for the short haul — short, because they are, after all, 65 or thereabouts. This means there is good news and bad news for libraries. How librarianship deals with this maturing will mean the difference between well-functioning libraries and Ozymandias-like disasters.

First, the good news about aging librarians. The good news is that there remains a long institutional memory and/or history at many libraries. Unlike other professions, the temptation to throw the baby out with the bathwater in libraries is minimized because those who remain actually knew the baby as a baby, or even delivered it. The more good news is that there is a rich and broad wellspring of experience. In a more mature staff there will be those who saw the first hint of automation, and perhaps even some who hand-typed card catalog cards. While neither provides much inherent value to be sure, this does provide a sound historical basis on which to build a future. Finally, these gray-haired (or bald-headed, as the case may be) librarians have seen everything. Quite a few of them have probably survived a few deans, several directors, not to mention more than a handful of presidents and/or CEOs. They know how things work in a given place, and how to get things done easily. They can direct any whippersnapper to the right people, places, or procedures, helping said whippersnapper to avoid institutional landmines, roadblocks, curmudgeons, or all of the above.

Now the bad news. There remains that same long, long, long and longer still institutional memory. It cannot be done that way, we have never done it that way, we don’t want to do it that way. We love the baby and its bathwater, and we’re not about to change it, throw it out or allow it to grow up, not on our watch, buster. Long-termers mean that there will likely not be any money for hiring new staff, so any new

ideas will have to be internally-generated. This isn’t impossible, of course, but it is hard for any aging organization to reinvent itself when the will to do so isn’t there, no prods exist to make it want to do so, and the light at the end of the proverbial tunnel of their careers is now very clearly in focus. Any new initiatives will have to be undertaken by aging librarians who may not want a new role, may disagree with the new approach, or may dig in against new duties altogether. Again, this is not always the case. But it is sometimes very difficult to initiate easily and well new ideas and new roles in a well-seasoned staff. Telling any 60-something year olds in any profession that he or she must now change what he or she has been doing for the last three decades in order to do something entirely new is not always greeted with, “Thank you for making my job interesting again.”

None of us, young or old, are really used to the idea that libraries must fight for every dollar, though we have been doing it all of our careers. We know we must, yet we still find it exhausting. Now we find we must also fight to make the case that libraries are still needed at all. While we have always fought for every dime, we have almost always lived in a halcyon age in which the *principle* that libraries are the cynosure of intellectual activity was taken for granted. Not anymore. If anything, we have to make the case that we aren’t obsolete and should not be made the handmaid of some IT department. Instilling that energy with the needed sense of urgency in an aging staff isn’t always easy to do.

The next five years will be a most important time for libraries. Can we make the necessary changes that must be made to remain relevant, and can we make those changes with the aging staffs we now have? Frankly, this isn’t so much a library issue as it is an issue that every organization must face. We baby-boomers are everywhere, and that means we are retiring in every profession. Because changes in librarianship have been hurling toward us at warp speed, however, the need to make the new with the old becomes more challenging as time goes on. It’s that new wine in old wineskins dilemma all over again.

Those libraries that make these changes wisely and well will flourish. Having the will to make them even with retirement in the rearview mirror is one more opportunity for librarians to prove their value once again. Creating the conditions for this to take place is the challenge not just for deans and department heads, but for everyone who works in a library. In academic libraries we serve a clientele that ranges in age from 18 to 70, some young people who have come from highly sophisticated high school libraries, some from very rudimentary ones. We serve veterans, adult learners, and some just taking a few courses every now and again. They all need their library to be the best and brightest it can be.

This means we must be the best and brightest we can be regardless of how old we are. 🌱



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How has this move from a closed-stack to an open-stack environment changed the workload? Per the library’s stacks manager: the DVDs are easy to re-shelve, the call number system is working well, and there has not been a big increase in his overall workload. There has been an increase in the workload of the Main Circulation Desk now that the Media Desk has closed. The circulation desk is responsible for all media check out, unlocking the DVDs, and checking the DVDs back into the collection. Also, more DVD circulation

means more time spent answering questions. Non-DVD media items were moved to the ARS, which has also changed the Circulation Desk’s workflow.

Even though the media desk has been closed, the area still houses various forms of equipment such as turntables and microfiche and microfilm readers. The library is currently in the process of evaluating the media area as well as the overall library to see how space is currently being used today. When the library was built almost 15 years ago it was anticipated space would be used one way, but over time how the library is being used continues to change. Although there was some initial

skepticism about closing a service point in the library; the current staff is not spread as thin and are better able to assist patrons. The library has also instituted a team of “roving student assistants” who are able to assist patrons with questions they may have about equipment housed in the media area.

The library’s decision to close a service point was not an easy one, but one that was necessary without an increase in staffing numbers. The decision to move the DVD collection from behind a desk to an open area turned out to be a benefit to patrons; as evidenced by a 76% increase in usage on an increase in numbers of 9%. 🌱