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Little Red Herrings — Arf! A Bark Really Worse than Its Bite

March 15, 2017

by **Mark Y. Herring** (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University)

It is never my intention with a column to affront anyone's sensibilities. Since my scribbles are opinion pieces by and large, it goes without saying that more often than not, someone is going to disagree. I don't worry so much about that, but when I do get the very occasional bitter pill in the form of an irate email or poisoned letter, I'm sorry for the individual who was so annoyed that he or she took the time to say so. I know that whoever it is, he or she probably had better things to do than occupy valuable time on something that peeved. Consider this an apology-in-advance for a column I know is going to annoy some, if not most, readers. I've even put off writing it for several semesters, thinking that I might not have to make any noise at all: the problem would just vanish. Alas, it has not, and like most things that start downhill, this one has gone dergringolade, as a physician, a French physician, might say.

This column is about the recent rising, and ongoing proliferation of emotional support animals (ESAs) on college and university campuses, not to mention just about everywhere else you look nowadays. The gushing glut has given new meaning to "animal house" at institutions of higher education everywhere. And it is now becoming an ever-growing and difficult-to-manage problem, as the *New York Times* reported recently (<http://nyti.ms/2jKDvhP>).

Now let me be *very* clear. This column is NOT about ADA approved animals, such as Seeing Eye dogs, or even small ponies that help someone do something he or she is physically unable to do (the blind to "see," the deaf to "hear," and the physically or mentally unable (e.g., PTSD), enabled). I support ADA regulations and I would expect anywhere I work to do the same. It is, after all, the law of the land.

Ah, but we never leave well enough alone, do we? Today, we have emotional support animals, not to mention therapy animals that comfort the comfortless, befriend the friendless, and assuage the ... assuageless. These animals can be almost anything, from a 195-pound St. Bernard, to a 6-pound ferret, to a 60-pound potbellied pig, to whatever else the individual in question has "registered." I put registered in quotes because registering — or not — your therapy animal isn't required and you don't need any distinguishing collar or marking. All one has to do is simply make the case — and put out the cash — and almost any animal is fair game to take anywhere. Such animals were unheard of only five years ago. Now, every campus in America finds itself in the teeth of such critters, so to speak. And not everyone is happy about it, especially those representing the genuinely handicapped (<http://www.servicedogcentral.org/content/node/76>).

A few years ago, *The New Yorker* ran a piece about the coming onslaught (<http://bit.ly/11d3jsy>). The columnist, **Patricia Marx**, wrote an engaging piece about five animals (including a llama) she took about New York just to see if she would be called into account. She was not. As she put it so eloquently in her excoriating piece:

Take a look around. See the St. Bernard slobbering over the shallots at Whole Foods? Isn't that a Rottweiler sitting third row, mezzanine, at Carnegie Hall? As you will have observed, an increasing number of your neighbors have been keeping company with their pets in human-only establishments, cohabiting with them in animal-unfriendly apartment buildings and dormitories, and taking them (free!) onto airplanes — simply by claiming that the creatures are their licensed companion animals and are necessary to their mental well-being. No government agency keeps track of such figures, but in 2011 the **National Service Animal Registry**, a commercial enterprise that sells certificates, vests, and badges for helper animals, signed up twenty-four hundred emotional-support animals. Last year, it registered eleven thousand.

NSAR is a commercial outfit that charges for the registration. The registration as of 20 January 2017, is 145,546. The site is a curious one, mixed as it is with confusing elements. It has a link to the **ADA** law and other pertinent information. What it does not do, however, is make the distinction between service animals (protected by **ADA**) and emotional service and companion animals, which in most cases are not (even though the names look the same, don't they?). If you go to the **ADA** site and look at its FAQs, you'll find:

Q3. Are emotional support, therapy, comfort, or companion animals considered service animals under the ADA?

1. **A.** No. These terms are used to describe animals that provide comfort just by being with a person. Because they have not been trained to perform a specific job or task, they do not qualify as service animals under the **ADA**. However, some State or local governments have laws that allow people to take emotional support animals into public places. You may check with your State and local government agencies to find out about these laws.

So, while the **NSAR** links to **ADA**, giving one the impression that all therapy and emotional support animals are **ADA** protected, they clearly are not in the majority of cases. To say this is confusing to people is an understatement. Most people are simply polite enough not to say anything, and most know that you cannot inquire too deeply into a person's **ADA** disability. But that is the point, really. All **ADA** approved animals automatically have a designation as a service animal because those animals have undergone extensive training. ESA animals have not.

As I said before, all you need to register an ESA is money. Most owners of ESAs, to be on the safe side, get some quack-salver to agree to whatever emotional need they have and so provide an official-sounding letter. The letter provides a further patina of science to bolster the quackery. The rest of us are forced simply to kowtow to the individual.

Some of you are doubtless wondering why this is such a big deal since, after all, libraries are exempt from ESAs. While that is true, individual colleges and universities can make their own determinations, and so many are, and increasingly in favor of admitting these animals everywhere. Institutions, obviously scared to death of possible litigation, choose to bow the knee rather than raise a brow. And so, here we are, on our way to campuses (not to mention a culture) that may soon look like Noah's Ark, but without the flooding waters *or* the Ark!

If all of this were not enough to give you pause, the actual "illnesses" might at least raise an eyebrow. In one case I observed, the young person had "test anxiety," among other stressors. The animal in this case helped "alleviate" the problem. What struck me as laughable is that this so-called "test anxiety" is what every student — with rare exception — had when I was in school. It made us study harder. Today, a menagerie of creatures are the rescue. Then I witnessed first-hand at least one contributing factor to the so-called test anxiety during testing week. The student in question spent the majority of the time in our building texting friends, reading *People* magazine, and tweeting. Could this have been as much the cause of test anxiety as anything else? Just saying. Another case had to do with a student who had, among other "issues," noise anxiety. Granted to the student, among other accommodations, was the "right" to listen to rock music whenever necessary.

Although I have inquired about these "conditions" regularly, I am not allowed to know the nature, breadth, depth, or diagnoses beyond a very general vagueness. Privacy *uber alles*. I must take it on a gnostic's word that these are legitimate "illnesses" that require these animals in our once ESA-exempt building. I have been assured repeatedly that intense vetting has occurred and medical evidence proves these cases. I have argued — to no avail of course — that if these individuals are truly so emotionally unstable as all that, should they be allowed in public, much less in a high stress arena such as a college or university where their anxiety is likely to be forced upon them regularly, every semester, at least four or five times, if not weekly? The inquiry was underappreciated and not answered.

I know I must appear callous and uncaring. I do not wish it so. Nevertheless, I do find it hard to comprehend why young people today are given so much latitude when it comes to emotional upset (the recent election an outstanding case in point). While the “suck it up and be an adult” approach has its own inherent problems, it did have the distinct advantage of helping those of us under its tutelage to understand that the slings and arrows of outrageous misfortune are part of regular life. The sooner one adapts to it, learns to cope with it, and moves on, the better.

Not so anymore. We coddle students today; we become their enablers for a legion of disgruntlements and whatever real or imagined ills they have. Those of us charged with helping these young people to become functioning adults make it certain that the unforgiving “real world” awaiting them in four, five or six years, is one they are decidedly *not* prepared for.