Professional Values: Priceless

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PROFESSIONAL
VALUES:
PRICELESS

It's our educational mission, not merely our marketing, that will secure librarianship's cultural cachet in the 21st century

by Bill Crowley and Deborah Ginsberg

A fundamental transformation is now underway in libraries of all types throughout the United States—the deprofessionalization of librarianship. Consider the following textbook cases of the process theories of professionalism, which stress that maintaining professionalism is an ongoing activity requiring the support of employers—support that is eroding for our field.

In America's leading public libraries, librarians are relegated to administrative positions while reference and storytelling duties traditionally performed by full-time, professionally educated librarians are transferred to library workers with only community college educations or on-the-job-training. Even collection development is being transferred to centralized selectors—staff lacking the hard-earned and regularly updated knowledge of communities and neighborhoods that one gains through the experience of interacting with patrons.

In "The Dirty Little Secret" (San Jose State University School of Library and Information Science Alum-

News, Fall 2003), author Christine Holmes describes job searches in which academic and special libraries advertise low-salaried assistant or specialist positions demanding only an associate or bachelor's degree. However, job requirements include second languages, extensive database-searching abilities, and everything else under the sun.

We librarians may have expected our degrees to grant us professional recognition throughout our careers, but process theories point out that "professionals are not automatically accorded respect, deference, and decent salaries when they acquire credentials, a code of ethics, a body of knowledge, state licensure, or even theory" (Sheila Slaughter and Larry L. Leslie, Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies, and the Entrepreneurial University, Johns Hopkins, 1997, p. 173). Instead, we will spend much of our careers establishing and defending the relevance of our degrees, the value of our expertise, the boundaries of our jurisdictions, and the legal and economic arrangements that undergird our practice. It is a task that is becoming more difficult as the hiring practices of libraries increasingly devalue librarian worth.

That's not to say that librarians have ever had the exclusive and acknowledged right to manage information throughout American culture. Indeed, the growth of electronic databases has made the prospects for advancing such a claim even less tenable. Information has become readily
available, and many academic programs outside of library and information science are teaching information searching and analysis. Globalization has expanded information education and labor supply even further. Because of this added competition, skills and education alone are no longer sufficient to achieve professional status in many professions.

Instead, 21st-century librarianship in the United States may well live or die on its ability to harness its expertise in support of a spectrum of values prized by significant subcultures within the broader national culture. To retain our professional status, librarians will need to trade on "intracultural reciprocity": the changing, context-specific perceptions of mutual worth by participants in geographical, organizational, social, cultural, and other arenas. Librarians will enjoy intracultural reciprocity as long as they are components of a group that accepts and supports their professionalism. By design a dynamic and changing reality, intracultural reciprocity can be extended—or withdrawn—in response to alterations in societal, cultural, or market contexts.

Skills are important in establishing intracultural reciprocity, but they are not enough. Librarians will be seen as professionals as long as our professionalism is valued in American culture. But the values that comprise modern America are complex and often seemingly contradictory.

The marketplace of ideals

On the one hand, Americans strongly value market success. Money is a value in and of itself, and having it can be more important than how it is gained. Yet other values also play a large factor in America. Our nation's well-documented commitment to religious belief, optimism, patriotism, and individual rights leads all other advanced industrialized nations. We resent hereditary classes and meritocracy, as documented by Seymour Martin Lipset in American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword (Norton, 1996). The complicated interaction of American ideals has created a culture that often makes public policy decisions for reasons transcending market values.

Inevitably, American values play significant roles in how—and whether—a community develops and supports a broad spectrum of academic, public, school, and special libraries, as well as the more recent entities known as information and knowledge management centers. But observers, including outside consultants, are often tempted to focus on merely the monetary or economic values that libraries and librarians bring to American culture.

Canadian library strategy consultant Gary Deane argues in "Bridging the Value Gap: Getting Past Professional Values to Customer Value in the Public Library" (Public Libraries, Sept./Oct. 2003, p. 315–19) that libraries need to focus on a narrow, market-driven definition of customer service value in order to remain relevant. The arguments he and other for-profit consultants advance for transforming the public library are, at bottom, not entirely incorrect. Librarians cannot ignore proven marketing techniques. We simply need to draw the line when our embrace of such techniques undermines the educational concept of the public library that has for so long been the fundamental basis for appropriating scarce public dollars to it.

Focusing on market values alone will be insufficient to achieve professional recognition among our constituencies. U.S. public law and social custom have always defined academic, public, and school libraries as educational and cultural institutions. It was in the process of carrying out those roles that librarians became extremely good at organizing, conveying, and using information.

In some aspects of librarianship, however, the quest for intracultural reciprocity may already be lost. The "librarian" job title will probably disappear from the private sector in the 21st century. While graduates with ALA-accredited degrees will continue to work in the for-profit sector, MIS and MBA graduates, whose credentials may have more prestige in the corporate world, will increasingly mirror the skills of MLS holders. Job applicants with more business-related skills and degrees might be seen as better candidates—especially if their employers hold similar degrees.

Surviving our successes

Academic librarians, meanwhile, are being hurt by their own professional success. Under their commendable leadership, decades of digitizing sources are making all but the most esoteric information available electronically. At the same time, the increase in online courses has provided even less incentive for students to visit the physical library.

University and college decision-makers are now facing increased demands to restrain costs by price-resistant consumers. The recognition of new fiscal limits—coupled with the eventual elimination by accrediting agencies of the requirement to house actual libraries on campus—may encourage another round of library downsizing comparable to that which decimated the ranks of catalogers after the rise of OCLC-assisted copy cataloging. Institutions may seriously consider reducing the number of academic librarians to the minimum necessary to maintain vendor contracts and handle the very specialized requests of faculty researchers.

As Christine Holmes found, academic institutions may replace librarians with library assistants or specialists possessing foreign-language and other credentials but not library degrees. Long-term survival for many academic librarians may involve adopting faculty requirements for
intracultural reciprocity and enhancing the library profession's perceived value by earning doctorates and teaching information analysis and use to tuition-paying students.

The 21st-century prospects for school librarians may be the most difficult to discern. Traditionally, schools have experienced a severe shortage of trained school librarians. Depending on local contexts, these shortages may contribute to removing educational requirements for appointment as a school librarian or the elimination of the mandate for school library media services. Clearly, such responses would undermine intracultural reciprocity and contribute to school librarian deprofessionalization. Alternatively, continuing shortages could lead to more positive developments. Numerous vacancies for school library media specialists may attract more students to ALA-accredited programs with school library components and/or their NCATE- or state-certified counterparts in colleges of education.

The future of librarianship in American society as a whole may well be inextricably bound with the fate of the nation's public libraries. In developing and delivering a broad range of programs from preschool to senior library services, public librarians and their support personnel are likely to offer both the first and the last library services used by most citizens. This extended interaction may even create mental templates through which the larger culture evaluates library services in every other context. However, as with academic libraries and school libraries, success in this effort will require both the maintenance of intracultural reciprocity at the local community level and within public libraries themselves.

For the most part, public libraries are locally funded entities with a demonstrated ability to adapt their service programs to meet changing community needs. In recent years, in addition to providing material in multiple formats, public libraries have added instruction on effective use of the internet and evening storytelling hours to accommodate patrons unable to come to the library during the work day. Resilience in responding to and helping to form local demand is a strategy that is likely to prove effective over the long run. In fact, the public library's various constituencies will insist on such accommodations as a condition of continued funding and use.

Fundamental to public librarians' ability to thrive in the 21st century is facing the reality that, in conjunction with library boards and local governments, it is the librarians themselves who must determine their employment qualifications. The public library situation is far different from the conditions affecting corporate, K–12, and academic contexts, where nonlibrarian administrators define and act upon changing, context-specific perceptions of mutual worth. It is an advantage that should not be lightly thrown away.

Through such efforts, public librarians can largely define their own conditions for intracultural reciprocity within their work cultures. Since the average life of a fad promoted by business consultants, including deprofessionalism,
is about five to seven years, public libraries need to think more than twice before downgrading librarian positions in response to a consultant's report. It is generally more difficult to upgrade a downgraded position later than to maintain its professional status.

Changes in the ways librarians are educated will have a particularly strong impact on whether librarians will be able to achieve intracultural reciprocity. Many traditional library programs have transformed themselves into schools of information science, due, in part, to perceived market-driven forces; global market conditions have resulted in less money for social welfare and education programs and more for encouraging corporate competitiveness. Areas identified with technoscience have especially benefited from this trend and information science is perceived by some to fit this label better than library science.

To some extent, this transformation may improve the chances for intracultural reciprocity for librarians in the corporate sector. Yet library practitioners, who have struggled for decades to establish the validity of their graduate professional degrees, recognize a fundamental flaw in redefining the profession as containing mere information practitioners who were educated as information intermediaries. This redefinition narrows the librarian's professional focus from purveyor of culture, education, information, and entertainment to solely that of information provider—the very same specialty in which millions of others, with considerable differences in academic preparation, are now asserting competence.

By eliminating the educational, cultural, and recreational roles of librarians through an information-centric curriculum, faculty in ALA-accredited programs have laid the intellectual groundwork for city councils and library boards to extend the same intracultural reciprocity they already grant to librarians to countless individuals with alternative information educations. These individuals may know information and web design but are unlikely to have taken courses in children's literature, young adult services, literacy, adult services, or leisure reading needs.

Librarianship is either a separate field with identifiable educational, informational, and recreational components or it is a subset of information science. Where librarians control or influence intracultural reciprocity (and thereby define the specific educational and general knowledge requirements for their institutions), they will continue to exist. If librarianship is seen only as a subsector of information, and its practitioners as possessing skills that can be acquired through a spectrum of intellectual contexts, it will come to represent those positions for which employers prize skill with specific databases rather than in-depth knowledge.

Unless librarianship as a profession takes the lead in defining itself as fundamental to the achievement of important cultural values, in particular the national commitment to education, it will be defined solely in economic terms by market forces. And, as the dot-com "bust" of the 1990s reminds us, those forces are not always rational.