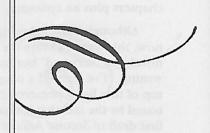# BLURRING OF LINES: ACADEMIC AND PUBLIC LIBRARIES REVISITED

by Patricia A. Steele

A mong the conclusions reached in *Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources: A Report to the OCLC Membership* in 2005, was the following: "The similarity of perceptions about libraries and their resources across respondents from six countries is striking. It suggests that libraries are seen by information consumers as a common solution, a single organization – one entity with many outlets – constant, consistent, expected" (De Rosa, 6.8). Does this mean that many of the traditional differences between public and academic libraries also are blurring? In this piece, I would like to explore that thought informally and then suggest some approaches libraries of all types need to take.

According to a message on the Google Librarian Center website, "Librarians and Google share a mission to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful." This statement marks a major shift in the information landscape – from one where libraries and librarians "owned" this mission to one where commercial competitors provide viable and even affordable alternatives to traditional libraries of all kinds. One could say that this shift in the information environment presents common challenges to public and academic libraries in ways that are very different from the past. When a large portion of books are available digitally, a certain commonality of collections occurs.

Since I find myself in the unique position of having strong associations with both a vital public library and a large academic library, I have had the opportunity to consider how each is reacting to the Google phenomena and how mass digitizing projects are changing the way users and library staff think about the future of the library or the library of the future. Planning for that future and developing strategies to assure continued viability is one part of my responsibilities as a trustee at Monroe County Public Library and as interim dean of libraries at Indiana University Bloomington. How are we becoming more similar? How do we remain distinct? How do we define and meet our missions?

In the not too distant past, the public library and the academic library had very clear missions that were quite distinct from each other. There was little overlap in the collections developed and made available, in the services offered, or even of primary concerns. Over time there have been aspects of blending that are new. For instance, public libraries developed traditions of outreach that did not become part of academic library life until relatively recently. Academic outreach now is seen as essential. Subject bibliographers have become outpost librarians with office hours in academic units while much more aggressive integration into curriculum development and new teaching methodology is sought.

One of the distinguishing hallmarks of the large research library was the collections built by bibliographers expert in the academic disciplines. They built for the scholars in the present and the future. Scholars came to the libraries to use the collections and to receive help from librarians who knew the collections and how to organize and access them. The library was a place to store the collections, to study the materials, and to consult with librarians. Scholars and students who used the academic library were captive consumers in the sense there were no alternatives to the academic library and its collections to conduct academic business. With the exception of mega public libraries such as New York Public, public library collections did not begin to address scholarly needs. Only the university or even college collection had the materials that represented the research resources in languages, topics, and depth that permitted the creation of new knowledge.

Little research was done outside of the library walls until technological developments made the Web the major delivery mechanism for library services and access. With the advent of electronic resources, users could access many library collections remotely. This meant that associated services also had to be reconceptualized in a way that accommodated the new capabilities and the resulting new ways of teaching and learning. Also changed was the user.

New students and ever increasing numbers of faculty have quite different expectations for the academic library. They demand service and access on a 24/7 basis. They also want that service and access to be fast, easy, integrated, and personalized. Each year the bar is raised a bit higher for the library to meet their needs and requirements.

In the sense of serving the same users, there was little likelihood of competing services or collections between the public and academic libraries of the past. Public libraries had numerous identified constituencies including children, new learners, adults, the disadvantaged, and even non-users. They sought to be community centers, thus "library as place" was a more open and integral part of their composition. They also had to be accountable to users in ways that were relatively foreign to academic libraries because of the clear tax relationship between citizens and the support of the local public library. In fact, one of the stated responsibilities for library trustees is advocacy in the community for the needs of the library. Those of us in academic libraries now are well-tuned to the need to define our role and justify our existence in ways never considered in the past. At Indiana University the adoption of Responsibility Centered Budgeting where the libraries are supported by "taxes" to the academic units certainly moved the IU Libraries into a new relationship with users – a relationship of new expectations and oversight.

The "Googlizing" of books and in Indiana, INSPIRE, have begun to widen the overlap of collections and resources available to our individual user communities. This clearly will increase over the next decades. When I read the OCLC study, *Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources*, another similarity of public and academic libraries became more apparent – our common loss of being the primary and first access point for information. Books and information are what users want from their library as the central mission. They expect electronic resources and easy access. But there are many other sources of books and information that users are comfortable using. The library Web page is not the first consulted for information, whether public or academic. In fact, only 1% of users went first to a library Web page to initiate a search. Because libraries have lost their distinct place as THE information destination, the blending of libraries in users' minds makes more sense. We are not as visible on the information front.

When users consider the library as a physical space they talk about cafes, good lighting, comfort, parking, quiet, an inviting environment, and other attributes that are not library-type specific. Academic libraries are providing coffee shops and other amenities that public libraries began adding when the phenomenon of the mega bookstores hit years ago. Thus we see another blurring. The heaviest users of both academic and public libraries are students from high school through graduate school. They probably select which library type to use based on convenience rather than type and they probably use both. In any case, their expectations of each library seems to be the same: "...as a place to learn, as a place to read, as a place to make information freely available, as a place to support literacy, as a place to provide research support, as a place to provide free computer/internet access and more" (De Rosa, 6.8).

If academic libraries and public libraries now share more things in common such as broader collection/resource access, user expectations for space and service, increased oversight by funders, and loss of information primacy with their constituents, how can they continue to differentiate mission and remain viable in the future? The most encouraging thing we can take from the OCLC study and from other insights is that the library brand is trusted by users. From that perspective, the brand is solid. Each library type needs to build upon that brand – expanding the user concept of books and information as the primary definition of library.

For all libraries, the first step is continual input from users in raising expectations, establishing mission, and setting goals. This input must be at all levels from individual encounters through formal and regular assessment activities.

Next, all library staff must understand their role in bringing users to the library – physically and virtually. Library staff must be highly visible and "in your face" with users and non-users. When we are not the only game in town, we have to be the most attractive, comfortable, and easiest to use. We must respond to the desires of the newer users for the kinds of services mentioned earlier in this article. Since user wishes change with technology and fashion, our assessment tools must be robust and nimble along with our response.

We must keep up with the technology. In the academic library it means being a major player on the campus and in the broader library community in initiatives that will determine how we conduct our work in the future. When cities like San Francisco soon will have ubiquitous wireless broadband available as the result of a Google investment, it raises the question of the role of the library when there is "world-wide webby."

We have to let go of services and processes that are not mission central. Remember, economies of scale favor the Googles of the world. We must buy what is more appropriate or effective and concentrate our resources as directly on user services as possible. If users expect materials to come as quickly from the

library as from Amazon, we need to invest in services that make our traditional collections as easy to use as are our electronic resources: do only what we can do best and most efficiently.

As has been said many times in our history, this is an exciting time to be a librarian. I would suggest that at this time it is not only exciting to be a librarian but that now there is an important chance to define and assure a future for information professionals in a world abounding in information. It will take confidence, much listening, good thinking, fast action, and always a positive attitude.

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