

Guest Editorial



Working with Our Teaching Faculty

In 1935, E. W. McDiarmid chronicled the "information explosion" of that time, noting that in the United States alone, some 8,000 new books would be published annually. McDiarmid called for both educators and librarians to be concerned "that students shall attain by experience an ability to use intelligently the stores of books that are almost everywhere made available for public use."¹

Over fifty years later in 1989, the American Library Association Presidential Committee on Information Literacy issued its *Final Report*, which chronicled the information explosion of our day and issued a similar admonition. The Committee wrote:

Ultimately, information literate people are those who have learned how to learn. They know how to learn because they know how knowledge is organized, how to find information, and how to use information in such a way that others can learn from them. They are people prepared for lifelong learning, because they can always find the information needed for any task or decision at hand.²

There are probably few academic librarians who would disagree with this statement. Indeed, most would consider information literacy to be one of the most important hallmarks of an educated person, and its transmission to be one of the most valued products of a student's independent use of the library. But if our professional literature is any indication, the fact is that academic libraries touch too few lives. Apparently, the reason for this does not lie in anything that libraries

are themselves doing, but rather in what teaching faculty are neglecting to do: they are not requiring their students to independently find, use, and evaluate information as an integral (and graded) component of the courses they teach.

In 1962, H. L. Sutton authored an opinion piece in *Saturday Review* entitled "Is the Library the Heart of the College?" Sutton was reacting to a previously published article which discussed college students' reading habits, but only mentioned in passing the role of the college library. He noted that he was "professionally offended and personally miffed" but not surprised:

Ignoring the library as a stimulating means of teaching is not uncharacteristic of some college teachers and administrators. They piously mention the library as 'the heart of the college,' but by inaction in course planning and teaching they demonstrate that the library is an appendage—and not too important an appendage at that.³

Sutton was critical of academic librarians who were either "reluctant to 'invade' the province of the teacher [or who had] given up."⁴

Sutton's piece was continuing a thread of professional discourse and research begun in the 1930s by librarians and scholars such as E. W. McDiarmid and A. C. Eurich, and continued thereafter by Harvie Branscomb, Larry Hardesty, Kenneth Allen, and John Lubans, to name but a few. One of the most notable of the researchers into this area of inquiry, Patri-

cia Knapp, provided a useful summary of this research in her book *College Teaching and the College Library* when she wrote:

We do know, from one investigation after another, that most students use the library very little, that some students apparently manage to do adequate college work without using it at all. Studies have shown, moreover, that the few who use the library a good deal are not necessarily the brightest nor the most successful students on the campus. The obvious implication of all of these studies is that the library's contribution to the educational program has been overstated. Use of the library is not an essential element, perhaps not even an important element, in the education of the college student.⁵

Although published in 1959, there is little in the way of research since the publication of Knapp's book to contradict these findings. Study after study from the 1960s onward has indicated that there is no reliable correlation between library use and academic achievement; that a relatively small proportion of library users usually account for a disproportionately high amount of a library's circulation; and that student library use is most often driven by faculty demand. It is this latter finding that really controls the first two, for teaching faculty really do not hold the expectation about student library use that librarians do. This is despite the fact that most of these faculty would probably support the values which are intrinsic to "information literacy."

If such be the case, what can academic librarians do? Certainly an ongoing commitment to instruction is part of the answer. But even more valuable would be finding ways to persuade teaching faculty to increase the library's involvement in their curriculum development and instructional methods. There have been

some experiments along these lines. Patricia Knapp recounted her own experience by commenting that such involvement "has great potential but that it can achieve significant results only at considerable cost. It requires more staff and better staff, librarians who have real understanding of the educational process and boundless perseverance and commitment."⁶

Part of what is needed is additional research and study on the behavior of teaching faculty in the various disciplines and on why they have adopted the particular course objectives and teaching methods they have, as well as on what librarians can do to influence these faculty to incorporate library research as a valued element of their classes. What are their expectations of how their students will make use of information resources, both on-site and remotely? How do they expect some of the new technologies such as the increasing availability of full text to affect their teaching styles? Do they even think about their students using information resources at all, and if not, why not? How do librarians forge effective partnerships in the design of curriculum, course outcomes, and teaching strategies that value information literacy? Of course, these are *educational* questions, and not generally considered to be part of the research agenda of librarians. But the students we serve might benefit if we were to become more professionally involved with these broader educational issues.

This may seem problematic to the academic librarian already hard pressed to provide even minimal services to an existing (if proportionally small) clientele. After all, there are many other compelling issues vying for our attention such as dwindling budgets, skyrocketing serials prices, the challenge of developing virtual libraries while maintaining the physical ones, the unabated and frenetic pace of technological change, and increasing demands for accountability. But we should not let such issues allow us to take

our eyes off the prize. And the prize is an enriched educational experience for all postsecondary students; an experience that truly leads to "information literacy."

In a recent article in *Change* magazine, Kenneth Green and Steven Gilbert speak to the importance and timeliness of this issue:

Information access, or information literacy (to use the ALA term) will be so vital for the growing cadre of knowledge workers and professionals in the coming century; consequently, the challenges information technology poses cut across all academic disciplines and across all occupational and professional fields.

It is an issue higher education institutions across the United States cannot ignore—but one that many faculty have no idea how to address and for which few teaching materials have been designed. It is an area where communication, cooperation, and collaboration among faculty, faculty support staff, and librarians will be essential.⁷

Broader involvement in educational and pedagogical issues has existed as a challenge for academic librarians throughout most of this century. Today it resonates as both a challenge and an opportunity that we cannot afford to ignore.

ROBERT K. BAKER

Notes

1. E. W. McDiarmid Jr., "Conditions Affecting Use of the College Library," *Library Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (1935): 59.
2. American Library Association Presidential Committee on Information Literacy, *Final Report* (Chicago: ALA, 1989), 1.
3. H. L. Sutton, "Is the Library the Heart of the College?" *Saturday Review* (Apr. 21, 1962): 62.
4. *Ibid.*, 63.
5. Patricia B. Knapp, *College Teaching and the College Library* (Chicago: ALA, 1959), 1.
6. Patricia B. Knapp, "The Reading of College Students," *Library Quarterly* 38 (1968): 302.
7. Kenneth C. Green and Steven W. Gilbert, "Great Expectations: Content, Communications, Productivity, and the Role of Information Technology in Higher Education," *Change* 27, no. 2 (Mar./Apr. 1995): 14.

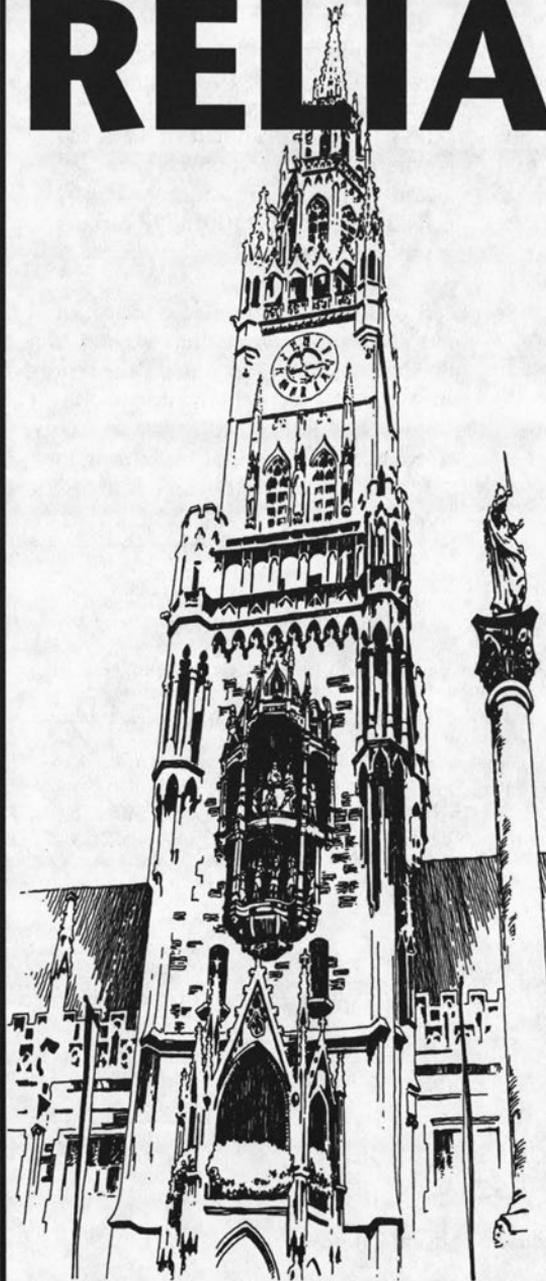
IN FORTHCOMING ISSUES OF COLLEGE & RESEARCH LIBRARIES

Who Cites Librarians? A Citation Analysis Study of Library Science
Terry Meyer and John Spencer

Collection Development Strategies for the University Center Library
Laura Rein, Maureen Connors, John Walsh, and Charlene Hurt

The Effect of CD-ROM Instruction and Assistance on Search Operator Use
Trudi E. Jacobson and Janice G. Newkirk

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