

Take charge of the future now

By Joanne R. Euster

Librarians must prepare for the future despite current fiscal woes

The next few years will be rough financially; our job now is to hunker down and wait it out." So a university president said to me recently. While I applauded the part of this sentiment that implies "first of all, do no harm," I believe that it would be a mistake to allow ourselves to become immobilized by fiscal adversity for an extended time. Doing minimal damage (and shouldn't that always be the first principle?) does not preclude building for the future. When the current fiscal crisis that so much of higher education is dealing with ends, we will emphatically *not* be lifting our heads from our foxholes into the same environment; times will have changed, technology will have continued to develop, expectations for higher education and for libraries will have changed, *we* will have changed.

Yet we are in danger of becoming captives of a state of mind that one new library director described to me, of an institution so traumatized by budget issues (and whatever their magnitude or nature, there is scarcely any segment among academic libraries that is not under pressure to make difficult budgetary choices), that constructive thinking was almost impossible.

Certainly the current state of affairs is not permanent. Undoubtedly, the national and state economies will improve. Undoubtedly, society will value and support educational, social, and environmental needs. Will this mean a return to a pattern of ever-growing support for higher education? A return to the growth of the last three decades is highly unlikely. Competition from K-12 education and social urgencies will increase; the suspicions of higher education's accountability, badly damaged by indirect costs,

executive perks, tuition increases, perceptions of academic workloads, the growth of non-teaching staffs have all, regardless of their merit or blame, contributed to an atmosphere in which taxpayers expect to see the highest levels of organizational efficiency for money expended. Furthermore, even if some sort of stasis in time were possible, we would miss opportunities. There are critical issues that should be addressed *now*. At the risk of once again proposing making lemonade out of more lemons than seem really fair at this juncture, I would like to propose some concerns that have elevated urgency.

Critical issues to address now

- **Continuous strategic planning.** Over the last decade most of us have become very familiar with the concept of strategic planning, and are aware of the principle calling for continuous planning. I doubt seriously, however, that we engage in deep fundamental examination of our libraries (or the environment in which they operate) on an annual basis. Since much of the change that occurs in libraries takes place in something approaching geologic time (and there are good reasons for this), such frequent reviews, let alone truly continuous review, seem unduly burdensome. Yet accelerated and continuous review and planning is the first step in rapid adaptation to changing circumstances. Organized planning processes tend to involve large numbers of staff, myriad meetings, and extensive consultation. Perhaps it is time to think of strategic planning as a mode of thought that all staff should share, and a tool for plans made at the unit level as well as librarywide.

- **Dramatic reconsideration of public services.** Public services activities have escaped the reconceptualizations that have affected other areas. The technical services revolution was enabled and spurred on by the development

of the large national networks and local systems. Collection development policies, the RLG Conspectus, approval plans and profiles, indeed the entire concept of collection management has replaced bibliography and acquisitions. Administrative operations now depend on LANs, electronic mail, electronic forms (in the more fortunate organizations), and electronic management information. Yet these operations exist only as the underpinnings for public services, where new activities and technologies have been added. Except for the growth of library instruction, there has been little change

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from decades-old modes of service delivery. The questions that should be asked address public services organization, but also reach beyond to consider the relation and priority of public services to other units.

● **A critical look at historic artifacts.**

How meaningful are the professional values we profess? "Free vs. fee" and "freedom of information," for example, may retain their value for us, but may also contain the seeds of their own destruction if we do not define what we mean in a more sophisticated manner. In an environment of trade-offs, are we holding unexamined sacred cows? Could the reference desk, for instance, be replaced by some mix of instructional offerings, an information desk, and consultation by appointment? What about a telephone and e-mail reference center that operates in a high-volume production mode as an alternative to in-person assistance? What of our emphasis on one-on-one personal services? Might not patrons *prefer* to check out, renew, and place interlibrary loan requests and holds electronically and independently? And what of our internal organizations? Does our reliance on layers of organization and extensive committees waste time and resources? Might we accomplish the same or better results by placing more trust and confidence in one another to get the job done intelligently?

● **Planning in earnest for the non-traditional student.** According to the Pew Higher Education Research Program, by the mid-1990s a decided majority of students will *not* be full-time

enrollees entering directly from high school. We should plan for services to nontraditional students now; in fact, present undergraduates may also benefit from these changes.

● **Rethinking the total service and economic impact.** What would the effects be of actively organizing the library to *discourage* in-building traffic via greater reliance on campus networks, telephone, and voice-response systems? Might enabling patrons to stay out of the library actually result in cost shifting (printing at home or office instead of in the library, reduced cleaning and wear and tear, less stack maintenance, for example) that would also benefit and please them? What are relative priorities between direct service to patrons and the library infrastructure? For example, could minimal-level cataloging (by whatever definition) serve patrons adequately and free more of the library's budget to increase collections, add to electronic resources, or provide higher levels of bibliographic instruction? If information technology calls for increased commitment to library instruction, might it not be time to admit that the charge is broader, encompassing real information management education, and that the responsibility belongs jointly to the library and the faculty? What priority, resource commitment, and organizational relationships would then be required?

True paradigm shifts are difficult to bring about intentionally; by their very nature they have something of the uncontrollable about them. And as some wag has noted, paradigm-busters are rarely rewarded—at least in their lifetimes! Nevertheless, we do have the ability and the responsibility to bring about serious and dramatic change. A few colleges and universities require an annual budget reduction of a small percentage in all departments, resulting in a pool of funds that may be given back to the unit, but only to fund new initiatives. The net result is mandatory pruning of current activities and incentives to introduce new ones. Numerous college and university libraries are already engaged in some aspects of the ideas and activities I have listed. They represent a philosophic shift that is at odds with much of our tradition. Yet there is no reason to expect that the need to reconceptualize will diminish or disappear. We need to take the risk of questioning old values and systematically applying our knowledge, experience, and understanding to define the problems, not in light of constraints, but in the context of the momentous changes in higher education. ■