

A value that bonds

The library as a uniquely democratic institution

by John W. Collins III

As ACRL President W. Lee Hisle contemplated his term in office, and probably even earlier as he considered his candidacy, he settled on the theme "Facing the Millennium: Values for the Electronic Information Age." All presidents have themes. Themes focus the activities of an organization and provide a sense of cohesion and direction for the membership. In Hisle's case, he has given us all the opportunity for reflection and renewed commitment. While not the first person to discuss the issues of values in the electronic age, Hisle—through a year of programs, discussion, focus groups, videos, editorials, etc.—has raised the bar by focusing the entire Association of College and Research Libraries on the values that are inherent within the profession of academic librarianship. He is to be commended.

As I reflect on these matters, the usual topics emerge: intellectual freedom, equity, service, cultural preservation. All virtues worthy of aspiration for any academic librarian. I am struck, however, by the common theme inherent in all of our values—libraries are the embodiment of the democratic ideal.

Libraries are uniquely democratic institutions. All American libraries fit this mold in one way or another. It is a value that transcends types of libraries—academic, public, school, etc. It is a value that bonds different types of librarians. It is the overriding value that is basic to our profession, one from which our other values spring.

Within academic libraries, collections attempt to present a variety of views. Equal access to information is promoted among the clientele and the clientele, like the collections, is diverse. Libraries are neutral and nonjudgmental. Even within college and research libraries, the democratic image of the self-educated individual can be seen daily as users pursue their studies within the stacks. The promotion of lifelong learning is a value embodied within higher education.

Now the question before us is how is this democratic ideal to be viewed in Hisle's new millennium? I believe that we do not have to reinvent our core values, they are enduring. Rather, we must meet the challenges and opportunities of the information age fortified by our convictions and firmly anchored in our values.

The third wave

I put the value of libraries as the embodiment of the democratic ideal in the following context. It can be argued that we are in the midst of a third great wave of expansion of libraries in this country. The first period of rapid growth was the result of Andrew Carnegie's vision and largess. His belief in the value of the library in the development of a nation was steadfast. The second period of growth occurred during the third quarter of this century and was the result of the rapidly expanding—and moving—population of the United States. Suburban growth, college and university expan-

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sion, and LSA and LSCA governmental support contributed to this period. The value of libraries as a critical component of a democratic society was thoroughly engrained in our national psyche.

Now we are in the midst of a third wave of tremendous expansion in American libraries. This time, however, growth is not marked by new buildings, and certainly not by a large influx of new money. It is marked by the expansion of the capabilities of libraries to access and deliver information in light of technology. Never before has the opportunity been so great for libraries.

The stakes are high. Fee-based services and commercial contracts limiting access to particular groups threaten to create a society of information rich and poor. Increasingly diverse constituencies are demanding increasingly diverse collections. Interdisciplinary research is becoming the norm. Even the expenses associated with technology threaten already overtaxed library budgets. The question is raised as to whether libraries can remain free in the ideological as well as the monetary sense.

A leveled playing field

High stakes, however, imply a high return. As those of us in the profession know well, the opportunities that now exist for libraries to fulfill their mission on a grand scale are real. The delivery of information to poor, inner-city schools in the same quality and time as that received in wealthy settings addresses issues of equity like never before. Access to huge collections by small libraries brings resources heretofore undreamed of to their constituencies. Academic and public libraries sharing resources with teachers and students over great distances break down barriers to learning.

We, as librarians, must champion the democratic ideal and the opportunities that technology presents to libraries to promote it.

The list is long: resource sharing, document delivery, interlibrary loan, digital projects, cooperative collection development, distance learning, to name a few. As academic librarians, we have a responsibility to our primary constituents, the students and faculty at our institutions. As librarians, we have responsibilities to our profession and the democratic values embedded within librarianship. ■

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