

## 7. Librarians: Expect Brilliance

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While you may not have noticed it, throughout this book I have been engaged in a semantic lie. I have talked about what libraries do or don't do, should or shouldn't do. The fact is that libraries can't do anything—they are buildings or rooms. The best you can say is that libraries shield you from the rain and exert gravity. Even the larger concept of a library as an abstract organization is a conceit. The work and impact of libraries is a result of people. These people include paraprofessionals, volunteers, board members, janitors, and guards. However, this work and impact are a direct result of librarians.

There are three basic ways to become a librarian: you are hired as one, you are educated as one, or you grow into being one. The first is the easiest and often least effective way. The second is the norm often mandated by law and probably the most effective way. The last is rare but can be incredibly powerful. Let us take these in turn and talk about the potential positives and pitfalls of each, plus a little of what we can expect from each as well.

### **Librarian by Hire**

In rural Vermont very few people get a graduate degree to be a librarian. The amount of money they would pay in tuition would never be matched by the income they would get, even as the director of a library. In many rural communities in the Southwest, a good number of library directors work part

time. There are plenty of people who work as librarians who have no formal training in the field of librarianship.

This is not restricted to just rural public libraries either. The Librarians of Congress have included historians, scholars, authors, and even a journalist. In fact, for centuries the heads of the libraries in colleges and universities were professors and humanities scholars.

There are some advantages to hiring non-professional librarians. They bring in new perspectives. They tend to be cheaper in terms of salaries. They can have more ties to the community than someone hired from outside.

However, there are some rather substantial disadvantages to hiring non-professionals as librarians. They often lack specific skills in facilitation. These can be as basic as organizing library resources or as complex as seeing the bigger picture of the libraries' role in the community and in the larger knowledge infrastructure. Many librarians by hire come in with a building-centric and book-centric view of librarianship.

The key to being a successful librarian by hire is a dedication to and support for continuous learning and training. States such as Illinois<sup>103</sup> and Maine<sup>104</sup> have active State Libraries that make it part of their mission to prepare librarians. These State Libraries provide workshops, online training, and even site visits to help prepare all librarians to do the job. You should expect your library staff, no matter what their background, to engage in continuous development and training. This means that you should also expect to support travel costs and time off for training.

## **Librarian by Degree**

The standard for preparing librarians is a master's degree in library and information science. In the United States and Canada, these programs are accredited by the American Library Association, and as of this writing there are about 60 such programs in North America. (Full disclosure: I work at one of them.) Probably the question students attending a graduate program in library science most often get is "you need a master's degree for that?"

I hope that this is not your question after reading to this point, but I understand why people ask it. After all, much of a librarian's job is to make certain things easier for people and, therefore, they tend to shield communities from the workings of the library. We will delve much deeper into what we should expect from librarians later in this chapter. In the meantime, let me talk about the skills librarians gain from a graduate education.

According to the American Library Association, degreed librarians should be expert in a curriculum that:

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<sup>103</sup> webjunction illinois ilead u (accessed December 5, 2015)

<sup>104</sup> state of maine library genealogy (accessed December 5, 2015)

*“is concerned with recordable information and knowledge, and the services and technologies to facilitate their management and use. The curriculum of library and information studies encompasses information and knowledge creation, communication, identification, selection, acquisition, organization and description, storage and retrieval, preservation, analysis, interpretation, evaluation, synthesis, dissemination, and management.”*<sup>105</sup>

In their studies librarians are introduced to a wide range of skills useful in libraries and, as it turns out, increasingly useful in other settings like, say, Google and other Fortune 500 companies. Degreed librarians work in libraries, certainly, but they also work as information architects, competitive intelligence officers, even as an executive vice president and head of mortgage servicing at JPMorgan Chase.<sup>106</sup> There are hundreds of librarians employed at publishers and database providers whose products are used throughout academia.

Librarians use their education and skills to identify the needs of a community and build systems to access resources to match the queries (and aspirations) of that community. This can mean creating systems for how items are shelved or how pages are linked on the web. What most people don't realize is that when Tim Berners-Lee invented the World Wide Web, he was trying to solve a library problem—how to find cited physics papers in a digital environment. Librarians are ultimately tool builders.

Does the degree matter? Recall the discussion of school librarians and test scores in Chapter 4. Study after study shows that the presence of a degreed librarian in a school has direct and positive impacts on test scores and retention. That is after controlling for factors like the room, the collection, demographics, and so on. It was the educated and certified librarian, not the library that made schools better.

Degreed librarians are ready to work, they have a deep knowledge of the field, and they have immediately useful skills. They are experts in not only the day-to-day functioning of a particular library, but have broadly applicable skills and a wide world-view to help communities in trying times.

However, library schools can also imbue these graduates with a book-and-building mentality that may limit their perspectives. One of the biggest concerns with librarians by degree is what I call Daedalus' Maze. Daedulus, as you may recall, was an incredible engineer from Greek mythology who built a maze so complex even he couldn't escape it. Librarians, too, have engineered

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<sup>105</sup> American Library Association, Office for Accreditation. (2008). Standards for accreditation of master's programs in library & information studies. Retrieved from [http://www.ala.org/accreditedprograms/sites/ala.org.accreditedprograms/files/content/standards/standards\\_2008.pdf](http://www.ala.org/accreditedprograms/sites/ala.org.accreditedprograms/files/content/standards/standards_2008.pdf)

<sup>106</sup> <http://www.syr.edu/trustees/inductees/larsen.html> (accessed May 7, 2012)

some incredible tools through their 3,000 year history. They have used tools like classification to build massive collections of materials with millions of items. Some libraries have used these tools to maintain libraries for centuries. The Bodleian Library at Oxford first opened its door in 1602, for example.<sup>107</sup> Yet these schemas and systems have also been used to create a maze of specialties and divisions within the profession. The problem lies in the fact that these tools are based on a specific approach to science and thought called reductionism.

Reductionism is when you take something big and complex and you break it down into smaller and smaller parts until you understand these parts. Then you can add up how all the small parts work and figure out the whole. It is why the Large Hadron Collider exists—take an atom and keep breaking it down until you find its smallest part. So libraries can take the world and break it into smaller and smaller topics allowing someone some precision in finding the parts.

For example, in 1863 Roger Bacon thought the world of ideas could be broken into three parts: memory (stuff about history), reason (stuff about philosophy), and imagination (stuff about the arts). It was a system later adopted by Thomas Jefferson, who used it to organize his considerable collection of books, a collection he later sold to the Congress of the United States to replace the Library of Congress after the British burned the first one. Back in 1732, Samuel Johnson thought he needed only two classes: philology, the study of words and other signs; and philosophy, the study of things signified by them.

However, of all the folks who thought they could classify the world, the one you probably most associate with libraries is Melvil Dewey. Dewey was a librarian and also a passionate advocate for both spelling reform (he would have spelled his name as Dui), and—wait for it—the metric system. This all came together in, as he would tell it, a revelation in church that would later become the Dewey Decimal System (decimal—metric...get it?).

He thought that all the books and materials in the world could be divided into ten categories:

- 000 – Computer science, information and general works
- 100 – Philosophy and psychology
- 200 – Religion
- 300 – Social sciences
- 400 – Language
- 500 – Science (including mathematics)
- 600 – Technology and applied science
- 700 – Arts and recreation

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<sup>107</sup> <http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/bodley/about/history> (accessed May 8, 2012)

- 800 – Literature
- 900 – History and geography

Each of these numbers could be further broken down into more specific topics. So, while books on history are all in the 900's, books on African history would be in the 960's, and the history of Egypt and Sudan would be in 962. Then you start adding numbers after the decimal point to get to an even more specific topic.

The beauty of Dewey's system is that the numbers can stay the same, but you can change the words to accommodate other languages (and changes in national borders). This ability to capture a wide variety of topics and languages, plus some downright excellent salesmanship by Dewey, helped his system to take off internationally. How has reductionism impacted librarians? The same way it has impacted your doctor.

If you break your leg you go to an orthopedist, unless it was a bone in your foot, then you go to a podiatrist. If your heart needs help, off to a cardiologist, unless it needs to be repaired, then you need a cardiothoracic surgeon. You get my point? We don't just have librarians, we have public librarians and academic librarians. We have reference academic librarians, and academic cataloging librarians. Take a look at the American Library Association. It has 11 major divisions (one for academic libraries, one for public, one for catalogers, one for librarians working with youth, etc.). It also has 18 offices to do the work of the organization (one for diversity, one for international relations, etc.). But wait, there's more. It lists 20 Roundtables...kind of like divisions, but not that big (intellectual freedom, library history, games and gaming, and so on). Then there are committees, task forces, and special working groups. It is so complex that at the annual conference you need a web-based program to find events related to your interests.

Why is this a problem? Because, as professionals in medicine are learning, your heart does not work alone. Your heart is part of a complex system. It may be affected by how your lungs work, or disease, or even how often you floss your teeth. This is the problem with reductionism in general; life is more complex than universal systems like the Dewey Decimal System allow for. While a book on faith healing or homeopathic remedies might belong in religion for some communities, it may well be considered medicine for others.

This is why librarians, hired or degreed, must become more flexible and holistic. Yes, they need to keep their values and mission in place, but the tools and organizational forms should be fluid. In science, both physical and social, we are seeing that if you take a complex system and break it down into its constituent parts and then put it back together, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. A community is not simply a lot of people with their

individual needs. A community is a set of needs and dreams and skills that, when intermixed, lead to whole new strengths, weaknesses, and dynamics.

Too often, degreed librarians (and the faculty who teach them) get stuck in the reductionist paradigm. Too often, degreed librarians use this reductionist approach to dismiss or ignore innovation and good ideas that come from outside of their specialization. You should expect more.

## **Librarian by Spirit**

The third class of librarians is people who do not have library degrees, and may not have the word “librarian” in their job titles, but who clearly have the same mission, skill set, and service outlook as the profession. People like David Rumsey.

Rumsey made a fortune in real estate and used that money to build an amazing collection of maps. He built himself a room full of maps. Now, that alone does not make Rumsey a librarian in spirit. Lots of folks who have done well build collections. What makes Rumsey noteworthy is that he also used his personal resources to digitize his maps and put them online. He then built a suite of tools to allow anyone to view the maps, compare them, and analyze their own maps. In essence, Rumsey facilitated learning by map lovers, college students, K-12 students, and geographers. This dedication not to simply collecting stuff, but using collections (and software and experts) as tools to facilitate knowledge creation makes him a librarian. This is a point that was recognized by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), the federal agency responsible for funding of libraries and museums.

All around your community are these “citizen librarians.” In Syracuse and Wisconsin and around the country, individuals and community groups unaffiliated with any library are building Little Free Libraries—mini book boxes. The containers are designed locally and installed at street corners and in people’s yards. The community is encouraged both to take and leave books. It is not the books that make these containers into libraries, however; it is the dedication to the community good and learning.

So, we know these are the ways one becomes a librarian. What exactly do librarians do? What should you expect from a librarian?

## **Salzburg and a Few of My Favorite Things**

To answer the question of what to expect from a librarian I need to take you to Salzburg, Austria. Over the mountain from the picturesque city is a schloss (a castle). It is a castle you probably know, because it was the inspiration and partial set for the von Trapp family manor in the movie *The Sound of Music*. The building is called Schloss Leopoldskron, and it is now the home of the Salzburg Global Seminar. The Seminar was started by three Harvard students right after World War II and was intended to be a sort of

training ground for emerging leaders of a new Europe. Today, the Seminar has broadened to a global scope and brings together leaders from around the world on topics as varied as global governance, culture, education, and finance.

On October 19, 2011, a group of library and museum innovators from over 31 countries gathered in Salzburg to discuss “Libraries and Museums in an Era of Participatory Culture.”<sup>108</sup> I was lucky enough to be invited. Through plenary panels and intensive break-out groups, the seminar fellows developed a series of recommendations and strategies for libraries and museums in the era of Facebook.

One of those groups was charged with developing recommendations around skills needed by librarians and museum professionals in today’s connected and participatory world. Rather than focusing solely on new skills or separate skills for librarians and museum professionals, the group developed a framework for a comprehensive and joint library/museum curriculum. In essence, the group focused on what librarians and museum professionals need to know, realizing that participatory culture has ramifications for new skills and traditional functions alike.

Much of this curriculum would not surprise you even before you read this book.

Librarians (my focus here) need to know technology. Specifically you should expect your librarians:

- To engage and evolve with technology.
- To impart technology to the community across generations.
- To create and maintain an effective virtual presence.
- To use technology to crowdsource and reach out to the community in a collaborative way (in other words, not a brochure-ware like static website, but one the community can use and help build).

Librarians should be skilled in asset management. This includes all the inventory skills we talked about, like cataloging, as well as preserving memories and materials for future generations and building collections when necessary. However, this is not limited to books and shelves (or in the case of museums, mummies in cases). This also includes safeguarding assets that are meant for regular use.

I have mentioned ideas like the prejudice library where libraries circulate more than just books and DVDs. There are public libraries that circulate fishing poles near rivers and libraries that circulate puppets. At the Fab Lab in

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<sup>108</sup> Mack, D. L. (2011, October 19–23). Libraries and museums in an era of participatory culture. Session 482 Report, Salzburg Global Seminar in partnership with Institute of Museum and Library Services. Retrieved from [http://www.ims.gov/assets/1/AssetManager/SGS\\_Report\\_2012.pdf](http://www.ims.gov/assets/1/AssetManager/SGS_Report_2012.pdf)

Fayetteville they will be circulating cameras and book-making materials. In Brooklyn they have an on-demand printing press that will print out bound books written by the community. In Africa they are circulating ceremonial masks; at Onondaga Community College you can check out models of body parts and vivisected cats for anatomy classes. My point here is that you should expect librarians to build living collections that the community needs and guarantee the availability of these resources for the whole community.

The next set of skills specified in the Salzburg Curriculum revolves around culture. You should expect librarians to be good communicators, not the stereotypically shy, mousy wallflowers. Librarians should be able to actively reach out to all sectors of a community, to understand the social mores of those community parts, and to bridge these different classes and strata.

Now, it would be easy to read that and think it just applies to public libraries. However, as a member of academia I can tell you there are plenty of cultural divides in higher education. Talking to faculty, then students, then administration can be like using three different languages. Likewise, school librarians have to understand not only the differences between teachers and students, but math teachers, and music teachers, and English teachers.

For too long too many librarians have holed up in their libraries and tried to create their own culture for the community to adjust to. It may be cloaked in terms like “creating a haven for readers” or “enhancing the atmosphere for scholars,” but make no mistake, these librarians are creating boundaries, not bridging them.

Let me be clear: the work of the librarian is specialized and it is hard. Navigating the conflicted and sprawling knowledge infrastructure for the right article or expert or resources takes professional preparation and a dedication found in other high-level information professions. And like those other professions, librarianship has developed a specialized language. For every bit of technobabble to come out of Silicon Valley, a librarian can find a corresponding bit of seemingly incoherent library-terminology. For every Retina Display LTE tablet there is a MARC record referencing an authority file to create a holdings record.

Being able to unlock walled gardens and a myriad of sources and then weave information into a comprehensive and comprehensible whole is one of the most valuable skills in a knowledge economy. That said, part of that work is to make the result easy to understand and use, not to make the community members into little librarians. You should expect your librarian to speak your language, and the librarian should expect you to respect that doing so is valuable work.

The Salzburg curriculum specifies a set of skills around knowledge and learning. You should expect your librarian to be an effective trainer and understand how you seek information, how you synthesize new knowledge,

and finally how to help you spread that new knowledge among the community.

You should expect your librarian to be a professional able to manage a library operation. This includes understanding funding, making projects and services sustainable, and doing all this in an ethical manner. A librarian, as a professional, needs to be able to assess the impact of library services and communicate that impact to the community. No more assuming a library is a universal good. How did the library help fulfill the needs and the aspirations of the community—specifically?

These competencies are not radical departures from how we have prepared librarians for decades—at least on the surface. There is one set of skills introduced in the Salzburg curriculum that is new: librarians must be skilled in Transformative Social Engagement.

A community should be a better place because it contains a library. Better means change—from how it is to something better. The library and librarians should add value to the community. If you add something like value, you change something. So bottom line, a librarian should help guide a community through a continuous change process. Feel free to revisit the whole jackbooted librarians discussion in the “Improve Society” chapter—we know that this change is not solely a matter of the librarian enacting a vision of change. It is also the librarian working with the community, facilitating the change.

How do librarians actively, and in some cases, proactively, engage in change? They must be able to identify community needs. They must be able to help the community organize around those needs, including understanding those needs in light of larger community agendas (like economic development, for example). They must be able to facilitate activism by the community. Librarians must be practiced in the art of negotiation and conflict management. They must help the community understand how these initiatives can be sustained over time.

For too long librarians have seen service as standing ready to serve. You must expect them to understand that no one changed the world by standing ready.

## **The Facilitators**

So librarians have skills around technology, asset management, cultural skills, and transformative social engagement. They use these skills toward their mission: to improve society through facilitating knowledge creation in their communities. Yet there’s a funny thing about that mission statement. I developed that statement for a part of a book written for librarians called the *Atlas of New Librarianship*. But I have had publishers say “that’s my mission.”

And I have journalists say, “that’s my mission.” I’ve also heard it from educators and even civil servants. And here’s the thing, they are all right.

More and more, information professions are wrestling with an ever more connected society where information is readily available. More professions are coming to understand the importance of social interactions and the complexities of community. Because of that, many professions have found themselves in increasingly close and sometimes disconcerting proximity to other professions.

Some librarians see this newfound proximity as a threat. These librarians retreat to what they have done historically, seeking a sort of safe boundary. There is a real problem with defining your profession by functions and tools rather than impact and mission. Once you begin to define yourself by what is it you do, new ways of doing things become threats. Or worse, anyone who does similar things becomes competition. Google is a threat because it doesn't use descriptive cataloging to index the world. So some librarians seek to dismiss it. Amazon is competition because it provides books. Worse yet, it is even letting folks borrow books on Kindles.

And what is the response to these so-called threats? Did librarians build a new Google, or their own eBook platform? No, instead they have adopted Google and Amazon because it turns out these tools work. Never mind that Google is the largest advertising agency in the world, and Amazon is now able to mine your reading history. If librarians and the communities that support them define the world through functional eyes of threats and competition, librarians do not engage new players as partners, nor do they effectively work to instill their values within their services. Too many librarians see what works, and use that tool nearly ignorant of the cost to themselves and those they serve.

Please do not misunderstand me: I use Google and Amazon. I use Facebook and Twitter. There is great value in these tools for librarians and for the community. However, all of these services can be made better through partnering with libraries. Where librarians can learn about new ways of discovering information or packaging content, these new partners can learn from a 3,000-year history of community engagement and a well-defined value system. However, this will only happen if librarians are open to true partnership and seen as valuable allies. If librarians are seen instead as isolated and stuck with functions of the past, why partner?

This is also true of professions like teaching and journalism. In some communities, local papers and public libraries are creating a sort of merger. Journalists are learning from librarians about inviting the community in as part of the news beat.

More teachers are adopting inquiry-based methods of learning. Many publishers are starting to give up the concept of gatekeeper to quality, and instead looking to spark conversations in readers. While it is beyond the

scope of this book, a science of facilitation is emerging. It has the potential to radically change the knowledge professions and the knowledge infrastructure of your community. You should expect your librarians to lead the way and look to create knowledge teams of diverse players to meet the needs of your community.

The potential power of a group of allied facilitating professions can be summed up in a concept like “Publisher of Community” and can be seen in the rural hills of Vermont. I have mentioned before that Vermont wired the state and provided high bandwidth Internet connections to libraries in rural areas. There is more to this story.

The State Library had to convince the rural libraries to pay for this access. The cost was not a lot of money, about \$100 per month for an amazing amount of bandwidth. Still, it was more than the nothing libraries were paying for, which was, in essence, a dialup connection. At the roll out meeting for the project, one of the project partners was getting a bit frustrated with perceived resistance, so she took to the stage and said (I’m paraphrasing here), “I don’t think you are getting this. We are offering you a service that should cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. Think of your connection now like a dirt path. This would be like bringing the autobahn to your front door.” I could almost see the eyes of the librarians in the room getting larger—in terror. I could see visions of hundreds of German headlights racing towards them at 100 miles an hour.

These libraries were looking at this Internet connection as a new type of book. The rural communities they served would come in and be able to consume things faster. That was not the point of the project, however. The fast connection was coming to the libraries, but it wasn’t meant to stop there, and it wasn’t meant for just really fast (and I’m talking *really* fast) web browsing. The connection was meant to spread to local businesses, hospitals, newspapers, and eventually homes. And it was meant not to just bring the world to rural Vermont but to unleash rural Vermont on the world.

Libraries could team up with local papers to publish news and events to neighboring communities. Local schools could use real time, high definition video conferencing to share classes. So if one small school couldn’t afford a French teacher, it could put together a class of students from eight schools. Local businesses could now trade their wares globally. Local artists could collaborate across the state. People leaving city life could relocate to rural counties and keep their jobs telecommuting. In essence, the connection was like a new type of printing press, and what was being printed was the community itself.

This is exactly the mission of libraries. Teaming with allied missions in journalism and publishing and teaching and health care expands the impact of libraries and the other fields. The librarian can weave together a connective fabric that encompasses the whole community in a way that no one else can.

Likewise, academic libraries can weave together departments and publish the work of a college or university and disseminate it to the world. School libraries can broadcast student projects and teachers' lesson plans out to the community and invite participation in the educational process by parents, government, and business alike.

You should expect your librarians to help form this publisher of the community; not in isolation, but with a rich and diverse set of actors.

## **Adding Up a Librarian**

So what is a librarian if not a degree, if not a mission statement in isolation, and if not a set of functions? I would argue that a librarian is the intersection of three things: the mission, the means of facilitation, and the values librarians bring to a community. We've already covered the first two (approach to mission and facilitation), but what about values?

Librarians hold these professional values: service, learning, openness, intellectual freedom and safety, and intellectual honesty. That is, librarians seek to serve, so the value of their work is measurable only in the impact it has on others. They value learning, so their impact is measured by how well others gain knowledge. They value openness, so the means that librarians use to facilitate learning are observable and transparent. Librarians value intellectual freedom and safety because the best learning happens in the richest knowledge environment possible. And librarians value intellectual honesty so the learner is guaranteed an honest guide through the learning process.

I have already touched on some of these. However, there is one value I need to expand upon for a moment: intellectual honesty. Some of you will note that I did not include "unbiased" in that list of values. That is because we cannot be unbiased. As humans, we instill our values, prejudices, and our own worldview into all that we do. The language you use, the color of your skin, the place you grew up, your education all influence how you see and interact with the world. You are not unbiased. Librarians believe that privacy is essential—that is a bias. Librarians believe that more views of a topic are better than fewer—that is a bias. Librarians believe, I hope, that librarians and libraries serve a vital role in a democracy—that too is a bias. We cannot be unbiased, but we can be intellectually honest.

Take the sciences. I am an information scientist. Scientists have not only acknowledged that we have biases but have even come up with measures to quantify them. Yet people still look at science as a legitimate way of examining the world. Why? Not because scientists as people are objective and neutral but because scientists have developed unbiased tools and an ethos of intellectual honesty. As a scientist I acknowledge my methods may be flawed, so I report them for examination. I acknowledge my interpretation of the data

may be wrong, so I publish my results. Science knows the difference between unbiased and transparent. You should expect librarians to adopt this distinction also.