

The community college library perspective in an age of opportunity

Meeting expectations in times of uncertainty

by Bernard Fradkin

There have never been greater opportunities for support in an academic environment than there are today for all libraries. But there have also never been greater challenges to that support. This reality is especially prevalent for community college libraries that are meeting new expectations in times of uncertainty and fiscal restraint. Because of that restraint, many community college library programs have become umbrella organizations working well beyond the core of vital contributions that traditional libraries have made to support college-wide programs.

As the demands increase for community college libraries to be "everything to everybody," the management skills of librarians, library staffs, and administrators have been stretched as never before to offer accessibility with assessment.

Serving the community

Community college libraries serve not only an academic community of students, faculty, and administrators, but also the larger communities beyond their campuses. These communities are made up of businesses, non-profit and governmental organizations, local patrons, public school teachers and students, and home-schooled youngsters, not to mention the general adult population

thirsting for the knowledge that only academic libraries can provide.

Making library service available on and beyond its own campus is key to the mission of the community college library. While most academic libraries hold basic services to faculty, staff, and students at the center of their missions, the community college library rarely forgets to include its local community in its mission statement. That local community can even include former students who have transferred to other colleges far away, yet who return during the summer months to brush up their academic skills in the libraries of their community college alma maters.

And then, there is the growing population of community college alumni who have since become employed and who return to their community college libraries for knowledge. The challenges that come with serving the greater community continue to add their weight to hundreds of community college libraries on a daily basis, as community college libraries struggle to maintain their chief role of providing the fundamental library services to their teachers and currently enrolled students.

The *community* in community college also means that the community college library very often will provide a library patron with

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the license to use its information resources. As these services become more competitive, some restrictions on which of them can be provided, including interlibrary loan and online database access services, require that the community college library issue patron cards for a nominal fee. Community college libraries still maintain the model of generally open access to the community, but as funding becomes restrictive, the libraries have to fold the scope of their services more closely back into those fundamental services spelled out in their colleges' educational mission statements.

Arguments that independent lifelong learning goes beyond taking classes and that tuition-supported enrollment will fund the community college library often become topics of heated debate. The reality is the more strain put upon the community college library, the more its services will be strained.

When economic times are better and funding is available, most libraries are less restrictive of community access. But current funding patterns, as well as the sources of continued support, are becoming tighter and the open doors to services at community college libraries are becoming even a hotter issue. When the time comes for a referendum and tax increase support from the public, the library is often perceived as a service that is free and open to all. But that service is not free in the sense that not all community colleges are locally tax-supported and many receive funding through state proportional funding.

The scope of community college library services is also often different among the nation's community colleges. At many libraries the delivery of instruction is an important component of core operations. These operations may include the development of alternatives—online courses, hybrids, telecourses, audio courses, newspaper courses, radio courses, experiential learning—and many of these delivery programs do not fit neatly into the traditional framework of course delivery. The community college library is charged with extending services, in whole or in part, that support these delivery modes.

This close association with these alternative learning options provides an access opportunity that is essential to the library mis-

sion, meaning that building literacy and supporting instruction may involve a team effort at designing effective instruction, especially the development of library assignments.

Library managers, as well as librarians, naturally are interested in satisfying the library client by providing accessible and convenient use of resources. But community college library staff members have often taken on additional duties associated with specific programs for underprepared students, outreach activities to high schools, academic computing, and newer populations of library patrons, as well as in facilitating the needs of community colleges to consolidate a variety of instructional support services from telecommunications to academic computing. While it is supportive of the community college library to lend assistance to the college, it is often done without the back-up of additional staff, space, and resources. Ingenuity and creativity on the parts of existing staff members may help to some degree, but stretching the scope of services at some point needs to be recognized as an urgent quality control issue.

Back to library

In the past, community college libraries have been called "learning resource centers," "educational resource centers," "instructional resource centers"—the list goes on. The College of DuPage changed its library's name from learning resource center to library after many years under the former title.

It was clear that *library* was the most favored term for librarians and other staff, after years of trying to explain the concept of a learning resource center. The library went through the traditional processes of focus groups with off-campus community members, faculty, and students, and searched the available literature to find that the current concept of library represented the full array of the services and support that we provided.

Library was the preferred term by our librarians (formerly materials utilization consultants, or "MUCS" for short), as well as the educational and extended community. The transition was successful with all constituency groups, and they have since recommended the change to several other community college libraries. *Library* today addresses the core responsibilities of our work,

as well as the technology aspects of the responsibilities often shared through development activities and consolidation.

A time of change and uncertainty contributes to the short- and long-term thinking about community college libraries. We can see new venues developing for sharing resources, building new products and services, and finding a niche in contributing to our communities as a guiding support for information literacy. Some community college libraries have found a global opportunity in reaching around the world to bring the richness of our programs to new developing nations on other continents. More community college libraries than ever are seeking new ways to begin working together on references and as downlink teleconference sites, building multi-type communities of libraries and links to other organizations, as well as new funding sources and services. Many of these advances are built on the solid background of our core values that have been provided by Ranganathan's *Five Laws of Library Science*¹ and Walter Crawford and Michael Gorman's *Updated Laws of Library Science*.²

Ranganathan's *Five Laws of Library Science* are: 1) Books are for use. 2) Every person his or her book. 3) Every book, its reader. 4) Save the time of the reader. 5) The library is a growing organism.

Crawford and Gorman's *Updated Laws of Library Science* are:

Libraries serve humanity. Respect all forms by which knowledge is communicated. Use technology intelligently to enhance service. Protect free access to knowledge.

As community college libraries change with the times, it is often best to adopt a clear perspective of the vital values that may guide their development. The opportunities are always there to forge links and take full advantage of our rich core values as we develop our futures together.

Notes

1. S. R. Ranganathan, *Five Laws of Library Science* (Bombay Asia Publishing House, 1963).

2. Walter Crawford and Michael Gorman, *Updated Laws of Library Science. Future Libraries: Dreams, Madness and Reality* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1995). ■

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