# Guest Editorial

# Embracing the New Technology and Keeping Harmony: In Search of a New Balance

We are now in the age where technological advancements in the area of information transfer and delivery are occurring at an unprecedented rate. We are witnessing the fastest growth and development ever experienced in the history of our civilization in telecommunications technology. The emerging technology is making the academic library environment change faster and become more complex, more competitive, and more global than ever before. There is no doubt that technological advancements have enabled academic libraries to provide better services for their users. Technology has become a driving force in reshaping our institutions of higher education. Abundant literature covers these changes. Moreover, these changes present new challenges of maintaining a harmonious, humanistic working environment.

In August 1996, while serving as an interpreter for the first China–U.S. Library Conference in Beijing, I had the opportunity to discuss these changes within the context of the two different cultures with my American and Chinese colleagues. With the new technology emerging at such a rapid rate, these librarians were very concerned about how to develop and sustain competent staff in order to use the technologies to serve students and faculty in the most effective way. There is an old Chinese proverb that says: "It takes ten years to grow trees, but a hundred to rear people."[1] There is an urgent need to come up with solutions if the harmonious, humanistic environment is to be maintained in the academic library. Questions focusing on possible solutions to the American academic library dilemma were main topics of our discussion. Having worked in academic libraries in both China and the United States for more than a decade, I was able to offer my observations: The deeper I have come to understand and appreciate the beauty of each culture, the more I have seen many aspects of these concerns sharing common ground. After lengthy exchanges, we reached the conclusion that diversities make each culture unique. We also realized that in the process of sharing global information, we all are facing the same challenges derived from emerging technology. Its impact is far beyond the boundaries of any culture.

Mencius (B.C. 372–289), a Chinese classical thinker, lived at a time when there were constant wars among several groups. At that time, people believed that good weather, favorable locality, and soldiers with high spirits were three indispensable components needed to win battles. However, Mencius said, "Heaven's favorable weather is less important than earth's advantageous terrain, and earth's advantageous terrain is less important than human unity."[2] Here, Mencius was claiming for the human world an importance greater even than heaven and earth. In his time, there was little or no emerging technology. His emphasis was on the human factor.

Today, we have become more and more dependent on technology, but we cannot

overlook an important component—the people who use technology to help students and faculty. The tools that academic libraries use to serve their patrons may change, but the missions of the libraries remain essentially the same. It is people who reconceptualize knowledge, create new knowledge, reinterpret existing knowledge, and preserve knowledge. Lee Iacocca believes that "In the end all business operations can be reduced to three words: people, product, and profit. People come first. Unless you've got a good team, you can't do much with the other two."[3]

### Communications and Collaborative Efforts

Emerging technology has made our organizations more complex. New organizational models are replacing old structures. The existing operational patterns are gearing to newly created divisions of labor due to economic pressures. In many academic libraries, some traditional functions and departments have been eliminated. New positions are created, and innovative units are put into practice. The roles of academic librarians on their campuses are changing and expanding. In this context, improved communication and negotiation skills are keys to maintain harmonious relations among library staff. I still remember one of the English classes in my college years when a professor whispered the words *beef noodles* to a student and asked him to whisper them to the next student and so on. By the time the words reached the fifteenth student, they had been combined into the word *breakfast*. Everyone laughed, but no one admitted to changing the words. In this communication process, someone might not have understood what was being whispered but, instead, added his or her own interpretation and passed it on to the next person. A lack of effective communication among all parties involved may contribute to conflicts and frustrations, even with good intentions.

Harmony can be achieved through collaborative efforts with combined energies and talents of the library staff. We need to create an environment composed of shared behavior and academic values. In this process, people at all levels will be empowered. Elmer H. Burack observed: "Unless the organization's culture clearly signals a desire for empowered employees, it is futile to try to persuade them to contribute ideas or to work harder in the evolving corporate renaissance."[4]

### Continuing Education /Lifelong Learning

Emerging technology requires our quick responses to keep the library staff current and informed of new developments. Library and information science schools may be unable to prepare information professionals for everything they will need in the real world. Thus, library staff development must be supported and encouraged, and should be an integral part of the library's strategy development and implementation. When library staff are empowered, we will be able to reach a balance of using new technology and maintaining a harmonious environment. Donald E. Riggs stated: "A commitment has to exist that encourages library staff to learn new ways of doing their work, to engage in think time, and to reduce barriers to the exchange of information."[5]

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In ancient China, a sixty-year-old man was finally awarded a scholarly degree after having spent his entire life pursuing it. One can imagine how excited he was when he learned that he would graduate. Unfortunately, the man's excitement was so extreme that he went insane. The implication of this story is that it is worthless to study when one is old. For many years, Chinese parents have tried

to tell their children not to follow that track. However, facing the rapid changes in our time, we have to give the story a new meaning. We have to stay current by absorbing new knowledge and learning the application of technology. Lifelong learning is becoming mandatory. From this perspective, my Chinese colleagues were very optimistic about the establishment of

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several training centers in China to provide professional development opportunities for library staff. This initiative also is incorporated into an integral library system plan for academic libraries in China. According to Qiang Zhu, "These training centers will help produce a large number of knowledge workers. University libraries should make commitments to invest resources and recruit college graduates

and overseas students to work in the libraries that are equipped with new technology."[6] As we move toward the new century, we should ensure that a new balance is reached in this technological age.

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**Notes**

1. This version of the proverb quotes from *A Chinese–EnglishDictionary*, ed. English Department, Beijing Foreign Languages Institute (Beijing, China: Commerce Publishing House, 1980), 617.

2. D.C. Lau, tr., *Mencius*, vol. 1 (Hong Kong: Chinese Univ. Pr., 1984), 73.

3. Lee Iacocca, *Lee Iacocca: An Autobiography* (New York: Bantam, 1984), 167.

4. Elmer H.Burack, *Corporate Resurgence and the New Employment Relations* (Westport, Conn.: Quorum, 1993), 132.

5. Donald E. Riggs, "What's in Store for Academic Librarians? Leadership and Management Issues," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 23 (Jan. 1997): 3–8.

6. Qiang Zhu, "Increasing the Pace of an Integral Library System in China: Moving toward the 21st Century," *Journal of Academic Libraries* 15 (1997): 6–9.