

Guest Editorial

Talking to Ourselves

Having been invited to contribute a guest editorial as a part of the celebration of *College & Research Libraries'* first half-century, it is bad form, I suppose, to use the occasion to complain. But in looking back over past issues, it is clear there's been a notable shortcoming on the part of academic librarians that this journal has failed to correct. As we push ahead into the next half-century it is high time someone does something about it!

How can I put this? Academic and research librarians do a splendid job of communicating what they're about—and *C&RL* reflects it admirably—but what we write is seen by almost nobody but other librarians. For all our meetings, conferences, and preconferences, for all our committees and task forces, our journals and yearbooks, are we any better understood by the clients in whose behalf we labor? By the senior officials who control our budgets and make information policy for our institutions? We talk too much to each other and not enough to them.

Surely I'm not alone in thinking that the view of the academic library from the administration building is no clearer today than it was when *C&RL* published Robert Munn's classic article in 1968. In fact, it may be even murkier. Dennis Carrigan, summarizing the "political economy" of academic librarians in an article published here in July 1988, reminded us that the administrators who control the institutional resources upon which the library depends are traditionally not major consumers of library services and can't be counted on to understand those services or to assess competently their quality or their importance. That is ominous as librarianship becomes more complicated and as the budgetary pressures on higher education move toward crisis proportions.

Interestingly enough, it was "the crisis in higher education and research" that supplied the note of urgency invoked by A.F. Kuhlman, the first editor of *C&RL*, in introducing this journal in 1939. In the very first issue he laid down eight objectives for the new venture; they included serving as the official means of communication within the association, publishing professionally significant articles and reviews, stimulating research and experimentation, and helping the ACRL develop into a strong and mature professional association. After fifty years we can give *C&RL* pretty good marks for achieving these objectives. But how about objectives four and five on Kuhlman's list?

- seek to bridge the gap between these librarians and the faculty, college administrators, and research workers whom they serve
- integrate efforts of college, university, and reference librarians with those of kindred groups such as educational and research agencies and learned societies

Here we've no grounds for self-satisfaction. The gap between us and our administrations (and sometimes our primary clients) still yawns on many campuses; nationally, we have not only failed to "integrate" our efforts with those of many kindred groups, but our lines of communication are almost nonexistent. We know we have a vital role to play in higher education, but sometimes we become acutely aware that our colleagues beyond the library have a remarkably superficial notion of who we are and what it is we do.

Given our Ptolemaic view of higher education—with librarians somewhere near the center of things—it is both ironic and inevitable that we should be surprised and disappointed to find that our services are not always understood and appreciated by others. But it's an old story. Recently someone handed me an article from *The Oberlin Review*, our student newspaper, entitled "What We Do at the Library." Submitted anonymously by a library staffer, it begins:

When the library staff compare notes once in a while, they conclude that there is a vast amount of ignorance regarding their line of work. When they are asked, 'Are you kept busy all the time?' 'Do you find much time to read?' 'What will you do when the work gives out?' they think, How little you know about a library. Some perhaps see no need for so large a staff; that, however, is because they have little idea of the amount of work to be done.

The writer goes on to describe in detail the organization of technical services and observes that since most of the work of processing goes on "behind the scenes," it attracts little notice from the majority of library users who concentrate their attention "on the person at the desk." That person, too, the anonymous writer concludes, has plenty of things to do: "Her sole duty is not to hand out books, nor does she find time to read."

As quaint as the language is—it was published, after all, on February 5, 1986—its basic message is no less valid in the much more sophisticated libraries of a century later. We cannot assume that what we do, and what it takes to support the kind of service we know is needed by our users, is self-evident, even to them. We must still work to "bridge the gap."

What can *C&RL* do to achieve goals four and five on A. F. Kuhlman's list? Figuring that out surely must be high on the agenda for the new editor Gloriana St. Claire, and her editorial board. Somehow we must find ways of reaching a wider audience. We've got to stop talking just to ourselves.

WILLIAM A. MOFFETT

Director of Libraries, Oberlin College
President, ACRL

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Susan Stearns
Vice President
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Obviously, we can't cover everything you need to know here. But we can send you an informative question-and-answer book on this important subject. Please write CLSI, Inc., 320 Nevada Street, Newtonville, MA 02160, or call us at 1-800-365-0085.

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