

Academic Librarianship: Traveling Across Time Lines

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Abstract

Many academic librarians hold the ranks as faculty. However, since their bases are not classrooms, their teaching status in the campuses sometimes causes some debates. The purpose of this article is to demystify the cultivation of a librarian by drawing an analogy with the long process of growing a tree, and also stress the importance of academic librarians in higher education in the 21st century.

Keywords : Librarian qualifications; United States; Academic librarianship; Librarian status

Introduction

To many people outside the library world, academic librarianship is a profession, which is overrated than it deserves. Is this notion justified? My aim is geared toward better understanding of the value of academic librarianship for those who are prejudiced and librarians as well.

While the focus of this article is the academic librarianship in the 21st century, I want to begin my discussion from the philosophy and preparation of this profession regardless of the time frame, because the foundation of becoming a librarian is the most important element of librarianship and applicable to all ages.

Growing up in the country and being a garden lover's daughter, I started to play with gardening tools such as shovels and pails long before I picked up a pencil or read a book. At very young age, I wished to be a gardener when I grew up. Of course, things did not go as expected, so I am only an amateur gardener, and making a living by being a librarian. Nevertheless, my life has been enriched by actively engaging myself in this hobby. This personal background preludes the metaphor I will make for the philosophy of librarian cultivation.

Cultivating a Librarian

There are four separate components of librarianship, which are **personal qualifications; virtues; information; library service** and each one facilitates the development of the others. My image drawn to this path is the growing process of a fruit tree.

Like every tree, it starts out from the germination of a tiny seed. One must plant a seed in order for a tree to grow, and, in the case of a librarian, there must be a desire to work in this field. A tree depends on a very strong system of roots to maintain its structure and sustain its growth, and I equate that to the personal qualifications of a professional. Stemming from the roots is the trunk, which is the central component and supports all other components of the tree. The core of librarianship is virtues, which maintain the integrity and dominate the growth of a librarian. The branches of a tree are responsible for the shaping of the tree, and the similarity in librarianship is the information, which is so essential and often the most visible part of the job performance. The last component is the foliage, which is the interaction between the tree and its surroundings, and the equivalent function for a librarian is the communications with library patrons.

If this analogy sounds more confusing than clear to you so far, the following is the further examination to show how the anatomy of a fruit tree can represent the groundwork of librarianship practice.

Personal Qualifications

As the root of a well-grown tree exerts a strong grip onto the soil, the foundation of information professionals is built on strong personal qualifications. Therefore, a librarian starts out with a solid level of academic training to acquire necessary skills. Again, just as the combination of soil and compost can truly nurture a healthy and fruitful tree, the professional growth of a librarian relies on the inquisitive mind and continuing acquisitions of new knowledge.

It is a common sense that a tree would not grow without water, because water helps the plant hold onto the soil while continues to assimilate nutrients. Likewise, for a librarian, it is the libraries/mentors that often determine the initial growth down the path since they are ones that help the librarian in learning and gathering the updated knowledge to establish a solid educational base.

Virtues

Once a tree grows above the soil, the first dominating feature is the stem, which eventually becomes the tree trunk, and that is what holds up the tree. The analogy made here is the virtues of a professional librarian. Virtues, in this context, include aptitude, attitude, and motivation to librarianship. It is virtues that guide a person for this career pursuit, advocate patrons' best interest and the development of the institution he/she serves as well. Like other career choices, aptitude tells where you should go, but altitude decides how far you will reach. Motivation is the driving force that sustains the professional growth, and, without the presence of this element, librarian is a job to collect the salary, not a profession on which you make a living and invest your talent.

Information

The next visible part of a fruit tree is the branches, which provide the movement to ensure the leaves remaining in the most favorable position and also form the structure of the tree. As branches are to a tree, so is information to a librarian. Depending on the hats being worn, librarians could be creators, providers and end users of information. Therefore, supposed information is a lifeline to a library, librarians are the ones who hold the reins of its existence.

Public Service

The last component for a tree is the foliage, which interacts with the atmosphere, and the important process of photosynthesis takes place at this level. It is the outreach of public service that mirrors the foliage of a librarian's contributions and many judgments have to be made during the communications between librarians and patrons. All the knowledge, talent, and years of training will go live on stage for a tough test in this final phase. Sometimes librarians feel comfortable to render good service with their ability; on the other side of the fence, there are occasions that even experienced librarians would fail to satisfy patrons' needs. Overall, communicating with patrons is challenging, interesting, and a great opportunity for self-improvement.

Librarianship in the New Millennium

When we progressed into the 21st century, the evolution of technologies

has been tremendous, and the explosion of information has been overwhelming. Fast paced growth and unending changes have made students feel lost and helpless at getting information to their best use. As information specialists, naturally it is our responsibility to help them weather through the chaotic information highway.

Apparently the paradigm shift has been on the horizon of library service since the late 1990s, and change has seemed the only constant ever since. However, as an old saying “The more changes take place, the more they remain the same” goes, the four cornerstones of cultivating a librarian—**personal qualifications, virtues, information, public service**, still remain as the essence of librarianship in the 21st century.

It goes without saying that with the emergence of new technologies, the format traditional library service has been outdated. The mandate for librarians in the new millennium should be enriched from the nutshell of old times. On top of the foundation, new focuses should be placed, more or less, on the following tracks as being indicated respectively.

Enhanced Personal Qualifications

Having the love and spirit for this profession is more important than ever with the increasing difficulty of staying in the “game” and playing well. Besides, it is understandable that the process of training a librarian, to meet the demands of the current trends, is tougher and takes more efforts to accomplish this mission.

In addition to the traditional reference and cataloging knowledge, technological competence at many aspects has been added to the job requirements. In other words, the expectations for librarians’ qualifications have crossed the boundaries of many fields.

Added Virtues

According to the rule of “survival of the fittest”, a successful librarian’s characteristics, other than the ones having been stressed before, should also include, but not limited to, the following strengths: 1. Flexibility—to adapt oneself to the environment without too many roadblocks; 2. Curiosity—a sure way to be aware of new happenings and keep one’s knowledge updated; 3. Patience—the imperative trait for service profession in modern society.

Management of Information

It has been agreed upon that in the information arena, electronic age is

the best and meanwhile the worst time. We live in a world whose supply of information is ample, fantastic, but very chaotic. This explains why information seekers would feel powerful now, and helpless next moment. To bridge the gap, the abundant data have to be selected and channeled by the expertise practice of librarians before library users are exposed to it. Therefore, despite the easy access of information, librarians are still the hands rocking the cradles in the information society.

Vision for Public Service

To keep abreast with the rapid change of landscape in college campuses, the images of modern academic librarians should be evolved to problem solvers and team players. Librarians should possess the good judgment for patrons' needs and the ability to identify and access desired information to make library services efficient and effective. Meanwhile, librarians should take initiatives to promote library services and market library resources to the students and faculty as well. In short, public service has moved from passive provision to active outreaching.

Conclusion

The success of a fruit tree relies on many factors such as: the richness of the soil; the right amount of water; the good disposition of the climate; and the abundance of sunlight. The same scenario can be applied to academic librarianship.

A committed librarian blessed with required skill, deep knowledge, resourceful information, brilliant guidance of the library will be able to take on the challenges and eventually excel to the level of expertise practice in this field.

A superior performance of academic librarianship, based on personal qualifications, virtues, information, and public service requires long-term development and refinement. The transformation from a desire to an excellent librarian is a tough but worthwhile journey.

The current status of academic librarians has come a long way and is definitely a due respect to all the librarians who have put their heart and efforts for this pursuit. It is especially true for academic librarianship in the 21st century.

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