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Law Librarianship: Rebirth or Buried Alive?

by John McNeill

Where do you see yourself in five years, in ten years? Everyone concerned with their life or career direction must answer this question. It is a question which, if honestly answered, leads to something akin to a psychoanalytic session. The answer requires taking stock of our assets and liabilities, and, in light of these, setting realistic goals.

The same is true concerning the direction of a field of endeavor. The AALL Committee on the Renaissance of Law Librarianship in the Information Age has just issued a report redefining law librarianship for the digital age. The report can be (appropriately) found online at AALLNET (<http://lawlib.wuacc.edu/aallnet/aallnet.edu>) under "committee reports." A synopsis by Committee Chair Kathy Carrick appeared in the *AALL Newsletter* (April 1996, p. 306).

The full report is must reading for all interested in law librarianship because it accurately defines the skills needed to bring us into the future. Unfortunately, the report makes suggestions that may lead, not to renaissance, but to lower salaries.

As a psychoanalysis of the profession, the report is enlightening because it shows how we devalue our own profession. The very term *renaissance* implies that the profession is dead and in need of rebirth. This, at a time when librarians have literally led the way to the digital age.

The report begins with an overview of the challenges we all face every day in dealing, on a limited budget, with ever-proliferating information sources while conquering the last technological innovations. Technology, though, when taken to its logical conclusion, may lead to the "library without walls," which also may be a library without librarians.

On a positive note, the report finds a role for librarians in the digital age. The digital age will not be exclusively digital; information will continue to come in a multiplicity of formats. Even in a largely digital environment where end-users

competently search bottomless databases, librarians will be needed as instructors and guides.

The "library without walls" may be a library without librarians.

Knowing what the future holds is only part of the job of knowing where we will be when the future arrives. Information is power. Other fields are competing with librarians for tomorrow's jobs. In academia, computer technicians and computer-literate faculty are trying to edge aside librarians. In law firms, paralegals and computer technicians are doing the same.

The report notes that those who undervalue librarians today are those who see no role for librarians in the future, but fails to note that we, too, undervalue the profession. The report itself states that "Paraprofessionals increasingly are doing work that was performed by professionals in the past."

The fact that some knowledge applied in law libraries may be found in other disciplines should not lead to the conclusion that someone with a degree in those fields will make a law librarian.

Who assigns paraprofessionals to professional tasks but professional librarians? Every time a clerk is assigned to the reference desk the profession is devalued. We devalue the profession again when, as the report suggests, librarians hire individuals with degrees in subjects other than library science such as CIS, MBA or MPA and represent them as law librarians. Such suggestions will only lead to lower salaries with increased competition for law library positions.

Profession is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., (1989), as "The occupation which one professes to follow.

a. A vocation in which a professed knowledge of some department of learning or science is used in its application to the affairs of others or in the practice of an art founded upon it."

Law librarianship, then, is the knowledge of legal information and its management, and the management of supporting staff. Law librarianship is an interdisciplinary science involving aspects of law, information science, computer science, and business administration. Law librarians apply this knowledge to serve the needs of our various constituencies.

The fact that some knowledge applied in law libraries may be found in other disciplines should not lead to the conclusion that someone with a degree in those fields will make a law librarian. An MBA, without more, could not run a library, nor could a computer specialist or social science major.

Of course, libraries need people with degrees in computer science. No modern library could operate without technical support. However, by way of crude analogy, the library also could not operate

without building maintenance to ensure that the lights and air conditioning worked properly.

Computers are important but they are simply the infrastructure through which information is obtained. A computer specialist, without more, should not be represented as a professional law librarian.

Fred Shapiro stated the following in a prescient article first published in 1984 (reprinted in Mersky and Leiter's book *The Spirit of Law Librarianship: A Reader*, Rothman, 1991):

Librarians today utilize an expanding arsenal of automated systems that facilitate research and technical processes. These systems will have a significant impact on library organization and use, but they should not affect the basic goals of library service. The competent librarian will master the new technologies so as to pursue these same goals as effectively as possible.

Library work may be billed as *information science* if this will upgrade the profession's image, but the *information scientist* will really be a librarian with new tools. To require competence in library and information science is redundant, since competency in librarianship implies familiarity with whatever tools are necessary to fulfill the library mission. (emphasis in the original)

In addition to a grounding in the liberal arts, the report sets forth several competencies required of future law librarians. These include: knowledge of the legal system and profession, knowledge of information and library science theory, knowledge of legal resources and research, knowledge of commercial, governmental, and nonprofit information providers in a variety of formats, knowledge of information technology, an understanding of the culture and structure of the organization where they work, and knowledge of management and administrative functions.

This is a challenging list which calls for an increased level of professionalism and professional education, not less. The proper response by AALL is to work with library schools (or whatever name they choose to go by) to ensure that those who graduate with an MLS, or its equivalent, have these important skills.

At a time when individuals without library credentials are competing with us for the jobs of the future, we should not ratify their mistaken perception that "anyone can do library work" by suggesting that individuals with an MPA could be hired as professional law librarians. Why should anyone respect us, if we do not respect our own profession and its educational standards by failing to ensure that professional library work is done by professional librarians?

Where will law librarianship be in 10 years? If we give our jobs away to non-professionals, we will be sitting on the sidelines watching others do our job. If we assert our professionalism, we will thrive and continue to lead the digital revolution.

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law librarianship