Partners in Poverty

By Bonnie Isman

"...where the application of human talent and dedications may assist in the solution of poverty and poverty-related problems..."

-VISTA Mission Statement

The following is submitted as a cautionary tale of

Advance to the rear!

ACADEMIA, the COMMUNITY, and FACULTY STATUS

By Jim Dwyer

One of the most ballyhooed trends of the past few decades has been faculty status for academic librarians. Many jumped on the bandwagon apparently believing that this new status would bring about a more professional working atmosphere and a reward structure similar to that granted other faculty without detrimental effects on library services or significant additional responsibilities. Just think of it: we could call ourselves faculty members at cocktail parties rather than mumbling into our drinks that we were mere mortal librarians.

Of course it was as foolish to assume that such a change could come without strings attached as it is to think that "faculty status" means the same thing at different institutions or over time. It was initially assumed that librarians could receive the laurels of tenure through some mixture of excellence in the performance of one's duties, professional development, university and community service, and research and publication. Increasingly, though, as student enrollments and government funds have dried up and institutions of higher learning (as well as libraries of all types) have been forced to tighten their belts, the final criteria has been given greater emphasis. Many untenured librarians who fail to publish scholarly research in juried journals now find themselves on slippery ground regardless of the sum total of their other contributions to their libraries, their profession, and their community.

Fearing job competition from lower paid and increasingly qualified para-professionals (who learned some rather professional skills while the librarians were inhabiting faculty carrels) some librarians have come to regard scholarship as the one duty distinguishing themselves from other library workers. Forget all you ever heard about the theoretical foundation, perspectives, and attitudes gained in library school or the importance of a solid educational background as hallmarks of professionalism. Forget the professional-client relationship; you have little time for that. Put on your research Uberalles and start digging in the fields of specialization.

But how could publish or perish have any but a salutory effect on libraries? We're all cut from the same cloth, nicht war? Sorry, but it isn't so. Those who have a traditional research orientation and an area of specialization are rewarded for their efforts, however marginal, even if they maintain mere competence rather than excellence in the delivery of library services. Those labeled as "service-oriented" (an attitude once thought essential) are forced to divert their energies toward research for which they have little enthusiasm. We can guess what sort of research they are likely to crank out: the very sludge that makes a day of "harnessing the information explosion" seem like canoe trip through a metropolitan sewage system. Is it desirable, or even ethical, for librarians to contribute to this cycle of wasted time, worthless information, and duplicated effort?

An overriding emphasis on traditional forms of scholarship may, in fact, inhibit the development of better library and community service. I do not mean to impugn the efforts of true scholars, present an anti-intellectual position or imply that everyday library work and research are mutually exclusive functions. The problem is that the latter function is currently being over-emphasized. Granted that the public benefits from solid study, however esoteric it may sometimes seem. To expect a central research orientation from all academic librarians, though, may remove them from public contact and service, limit personnel available for outreach services, and substantially diminish the "free time" which might otherwise be spent in civic involvement. Is it any wonder that much of the public considers universities as no more than "ivory towers" or libraries as "budgetary frills."

Everyone has his or her own special talents which can be developed and used for the benefit of both the individual and society in general. If A is a superb scholar, B excels in teaching (or reference or cataloging), C advances the work of professional organizations and D has special abilities in institutional or community development, why must all be judged by the standard that applies best to the scholar?

What of those librarians who make literary or artistic contributions; aren't their contributions to culture far greater than those of the critic, or the writer of criticism on criticism, or the specialist in criticism on criticism on criticism? Should historian, mathematician, artist-in-residence and librarian all be working the same vineyards and made to fit an increasingly inflexible mold; is there room for but one species in the academic forest? Are we aping a dying species while new ones evolve, stereotypically reacting rather than leading a new way?

In attempting to flee the old mousy image, librarians should be wary not to be baited into the mousetrap of a more circumscribed role. I am not advocating a flight from "faculty status," merely suggesting that our duties and roles must be commensurate with our array of talents. For most of us, our primary contribution is not the publication or scholarly research (or what often passes for it in library lit.) We should be hired, promoted, and rewarded based on a match or individual skills and individual job requirements. Why should we all don cap and gown when it so **often hides a rainbow?** ^

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CHICAGO

Ethnic Materials Task Force
Sunday, Jan. 22 4:30pm
Monday, Jan. 23 4:30pm
Task Force on Women
Sunday, Jan. 22 8:30pm
Monday, Jan. 23 8:00am-6:00pm
Tuesday,Jan. 24 2:00pm
Wednesday,Jan.25 10:00am
Alternatives in Print Task Force
Monday, Jan. 23 8:00am
Say Liberation Task Force
Monday, Jan. 23 8:30pm

SRRT Action Council
Monday, Jan. 23 2:00pm
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