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Educational Role of Academic Librarians: Interpretation and Critique of Joseph McDonald's
Perspective of Academic Libraries and Librarians

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New Wineskin

In his recent article entitled, "New Wine, New Wineskins," Joseph McDonald (2011) criticized current academic librarianship and proposed a new model for it. According to McDonald, academic librarians are obsessed with trying to guess the future and providing access to information to the detriment of students and academic librarianship. He claimed that they expend inordinate amounts of time and energy to discover the future of higher education and academic librarianship so that they can continue to function in the future. Furthermore, he accused academic librarians of believing their role is limited to providing information to students rather than helping them interact with the information. For this reason, they spend most of their money, time, and effort obtaining and organizing physical resources, subscribing to electronic databases, and acquiring and maintaining information technology to easily access information. Instead, argued McDonald, they should focus on directly supporting the core mission of their institution, i.e. student learning.

McDonald wrote that student learning included the ability to contextualize, give meaning to, and apply information. However, he argued that it was not enough to teach students to do this with information in general or even information that generally supports the curriculum of the institution. Students must be taught to contextualize, give meaning to, and apply information that is specifically required by classroom teachers. For this reason, McDonald proposed that the collection of information in (and through) academic libraries should be under the direction of

classroom teachers and supervised by a Curriculum Committee. The acquisition and management of resources would be handled by people with undergraduate training.

He reluctantly admitted that providing access to information and teaching students to find good information was important, but he insisted that it was not part of student learning. In fact, he thought that teaching students how to find resources was unnecessary because students would automatically learn this skill by the time they graduated. Furthermore, he wrote that teaching students how to find resources without teaching them how to contextualize, give meaning to, and apply information, was harmful to students because it gave them the impression that the ability to find and organize information was the sum total of learning.

McDonald would replace academic libraries with information and learning centers and academic librarians with information and learning specialists. These specialists would assist classroom teachers by tutoring individual or small groups of students to help them improve their ability to find, derive meaning from, write and speak about, and use information and to critique information technology. Only those who had begun or completed graduate education, especially in education or English, would qualify for this position.

A Different Wineskin

Dr. McDonald made a valid point about academic librarianship's obsession with the future. Those who predict the future have less than stellar track records, and academic librarians who seek to fulfill a role based upon future predictions of higher education and librarianship will likely be disappointed. However, his portrayal of academic librarians believing that their responsibility only entails providing access to good resources is not accurate about most academic librarians. In fact, most academic librarians are beginning to focus on what McDonald

emphasizes, i.e. student learning. Since student learning is the core mission of higher education and a basic need of all future students, this focus is important.

He advocated for a change of role within academic librarianship that he thinks will better support student learning. The advancement of information technology and easier access to information has forced academic librarians to reassess their role. The few academic librarians who continue to see their primary role as providing access to resources will probably go the way of cassette tapes because there are so many other sources of information besides libraries. Those academic librarians who embrace the role of selecting good resources will probably have some part in future higher education because of the increase of low quality information. Many academic librarians believe they should have more direct involvement in the educational process by emphasizing information literacy. McDonald apparently limits information literacy to teaching student how to find information and seemingly refuses to acknowledge its other components. His proposed model is much closer to the information literacy model than he realizes.

According to McDonald, teaching students to find good information is not important in the educational process. He would have classroom teachers tell students what information to read and why. While emphasizing the need to teach students to read and write, he thinks students will automatically pick up research skills on their own. Sometimes it is appropriate for classroom teachers to choose the information for their students, but sooner or later they will need to learn that skill for themselves. A Chinese proverb teaches people to fish instead of just giving them a fish. How will students know how to find good information after they graduate unless they are taught this skill during their undergraduate experience? The best time to teach this to students is when they are learning how to contextualize, give meaning to, and apply the good information

they find. Since classroom teachers generally do not have the time, inclination, or skill to teach students how to do research, academic librarians are currently the best option.

McDonald's wrote that in the information and learning centers there would be no reference librarians. In fact, there would be no academic librarians at all. The centers would be managed by classroom teachers and learning specialists with graduate degrees, preferably in English or education, would provide extensive help to students. The other tasks would be performed by staff with undergraduate degrees. This is an interesting idea, but it is impractical. Research is much more complicated than McDonald lets on, and learning how to teach it requires more than a brief course of study - even if it is on the undergraduate level. Furthermore, the comprehensive knowledge and skills that would be required of information and learning specialists seems unrealistic. It is doubtful if classroom teachers who manage information and learning centers could find enough people with this level of education and experience to fill the many positions that would be required. If they could find them, they would probably not have enough money to hire them.

A more practical and effective proposal is to have academic librarians, information technologists, and classroom teachers, especially writing and speech teachers, collaborate to devise a plan to ensure that students learn the entire research process, from finding good information to presenting their findings effectively. Academic librarians can help bring this about by using a three pronged strategy. First of all, they can work with individual professors and departments to provide classroom instruction and research assistance to encourage research competencies. Secondly, they can assess students' research competencies and share the results with the students' teachers. Thirdly, academic librarians can seek to become part of general

education and assessment proposals and committees and encourage them to incorporate research competencies into the curriculum.

Resources

McDonald, J. (2011). New wine, new wineskins. *College & Undergraduate Libraries*, 18(2), 136-149.

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