Director’s Message: The Attainable Professional Advantages of Being an Old Timer

By Kathryn H. Carpenter

Being an old timey librarian from that wonderful era “back in the day” – as well as an old timer in an organization -- is a status that is appealing and interesting as well as inevitable as the years go by.

The opportunity to provide an illuminating (and brief) backstory for a perplexing situation is rewarding because it is helpful to newer colleagues who have no idea why a simple suggestion causes a minor uproar. The old-timers have a lock on explaining institutional culture because they know first-hand the institutional history. They are also able to express, in an organizational context, the librarian’s raison d’etre to match information sought with the seeker of that information.

A related advantage, being able to analyze and convey the positive long-term impact of long-ago decisions, confers the ability to reveal the library’s positive, enduring values even when times are turbulent, and to emphasize the stable foundation on which the ambiguities of the current situation live. Knowing that they may rely on the organization is reassuring to colleagues who are encountering their first or second cycle of what looks like confusion or loss of support and which is certainly ambiguous.

Being entrusted to lead broad organizational initiatives that will impact everyone in the library is a rewarding, challenging, and yes, interesting, benefit of accumulated experience and knowledge. Senior staff are often charged with moving library wide projects forward because the dean delegates the authority to do so to colleagues who already hold broad scope and accountability. That’s what they are paid to do! Every ounce of knowledge and ability is necessary to carry out these kinds of assignments, which require as much learning as knowledge. What is equally important is engagement, commitment, and dedication to the work. Having an opportunity to make a difference, or more accurately, to still make a difference, is irresistible to old timey librarians, particularly those who dedicated their lives to furthering the value and impact of their library.

It’s difficult to conceive of any effort more important than encouraging a culture of diversity, equity, and inclusion – with the knowledge, support, practices, and policies to support it – in the academic health sciences library now and in the future. For most, and certainly those who began working in a different era, the learning curve is very sharp. Although a culture of diversity, equity, and inclusion may seem like one vital component of the vision for the library in the coming years, it really is the vision itself. On the other hand, an informed, innovative vision for the library is dependent on achieving diverse,
equitable, and inclusive ways in which to operate and add value to the efforts of students, faculty, clinicians, and staff.

This is all very interesting, no doubt about it. What is most provocative is that the values, methods, and responsibilities described above in no way reflect a desire to preserve, other than as history, the status quo in the library. Perhaps that is a characteristic of health sciences librarians, who in general are impatient to move forward with ideas and plans. A gratuitous old timer anecdote here: a dynamic colleague would interrupt meetings to say that there had been enough talk and now it was time for action. That would bring conversation to a halt, but didn’t always result immediately in an action plan! On the other hand, a desire to improve conditions, whether that be through mentoring, culture change, new processes, or challenging initiatives, may be the enduring legacy of the colleague who perseveres through interesting, and acutely interesting, times in the institution and in the field.

Kathryn H. Carpenter Professor and Associate Dean
University Library Associate University Librarian
Health Sciences Library of the Health Sciences-Chicago
khc@uic.edu