

Editorial

The announcement that the world's oldest library school – the School of Library Service at Columbia University in New York – is scheduled shortly to close has generated a lot of comment, at least in North America, Columbia's school was by no means the first to close its doors on this continent; it has joined a club numbering more than a dozen including other well-known schools at Chicago, Case Western and the University of Southern California. Only the optimist could now be confident that it will be the last. What is happening?

The United States and Canada between them still have fifty-nine library schools (counting Columbia) whose master's programs in library and information studies (or variants on this name) are accredited by the American Library Association. This might seem a large number, but given the combined populations of the two countries (around 256 million) it is certainly not excessive. Indeed, fears have already been expressed that the remaining schools will be unable to meet the demand for information professionals on this continent. There is no evidence to suggest that low enrolments have dealt the fatal blows.

Nor is there strong evidence to suggest that the explanation lies in curricula shortcomings. The accreditation process is intended to maintain standards in first-level graduate programs and this supervision is probably more rigorous in North America than in most other places. Yet schools which lose their full accreditation have survived (often to regain it in a short space of time) while schools with no such problems have gone under. It may be, of course, that university administrators judge programs by different standards than professional bodies.

At Columbia University the impetus for closure came from a desire to expand the library's premises by evicting the library school from its home within the library's building; the cost of re-location was a strong argument used by the administration in justification of its decision. Yet it seems clear from the ensuing documentation from all concerned parties that at most financial considerations were but one factor and alone cannot explain the drastic solution which was found. In 1988 Marion Paris concluded in her detailed study of four library school closures that 'It is an oversimplification to conclude that the four library schools were closed solely for financial reasons; although initially perhaps, that is what university officials would have desired interested parties, including the press, to believe.' [1] That many universities are going through difficult economic times is irrefutable, but the closure of their library schools is unlikely to restore solvency if only because such schools typically are small units on campus and the consequent savings would be relatively minor.

In difficult times, though, it is the outsiders who are most at risk, and too often library schools are perceived by fellow departments as lying on the periphery (or worse still, perhaps, are not really perceived at all). In part this is to do with the subject matter of the discipline. Even those within the schools can find it difficult to define precisely what they are (or should be) teaching, and this hardly helps to counter the doubters from without. Educational programs (ironically first at Columbia) emerged from training courses and the distinction between education and training has continued to plague all concerned. Lack of academic clout is an accusation which has been levelled at library schools and the addition of 'information science' to the nomenclature has not necessarily silenced the doubters.

It is also difficult to serve two masters, and library schools must balance on the tightrope spanning the chasm flanked by academe on one side and 'the profession' on the other. This chasm may well be both deeper and wider in North America than, say, in the United Kingdom where professional bodies such as the Library Association have less say in academic matters than their American counterparts.

Given limited (and always finite) resources, library schools must make choices; they must have low priorities as well as high priorities. If continuing education, participation in professional bodies and liaison work with libraries is given high priority then research and publication may be relegated to low priority, or vice versa. Whichever route is chosen, someone is going to be unhappy with the school.

There is growing evidence to suggest that a crucial element in the closure crisis is the relative (or absolute) isolation of library schools from the broader academic community within the university, and especially from the senior administrators, the very same who sit in judgement on the survival or extinction of units. The cosy world of the library school, safe from the hurly-burly of the campus cut and thrust, and often spared the drudgery of large undergraduate classes in 'foreign' departments, has its strong attractions. But if faculty will not emerge from the cocoon and become involved in university politicking then they should not be overly surprised when others seize their chances. Paris does not mince words:

A serious charge leveled against the four defunct programs is that their executives and faculty were isolated from their academic peers. Neither socially nor academically were library educators known to any degree by their colleagues, it was said . . . In at least four instances, it would appear, library educators maintained stronger ties with the professional practice than with their own universities and faculty colleagues . . . Library educators can no longer afford to be isolated from their universities. [1]

There is a certain irony that such closures should coincide with the emergence of 'the information society' and a growing interest from other departments in information processing. Schools dedicated to the collection, storage, retrieval and dissemination of information should have been prospering rather than in crisis. Perhaps they have been too unwilling to seize opportunities and have stood aside while business schools

and computer science departments have shouldered in to this new domain. Perhaps they are too emotionally tied to an institution – the library – to appreciate opportunities elsewhere.

But it need not be like this. Where some schools are closing others are thriving, grabbing opportunities which only now are appearing, making the best of a world which has never offered more. Chances to collaborate with industry in joint research, to develop joint teaching and research programs with other departments, to attract good students, to retain traditional employment markets while exploiting new ones, to provide expertise within the university for information-related tasks: all is possible and is being done where there is the will.

Individual schools may have disappeared because of a combination of circumstances beyond their control; to say the blame always lies with the library school is to succumb to the lack of self-confidence all too prevalent in librarianship. Equally, however, schools cannot be absolved of all responsibility for their collective plight. They must take the initiative in their own defence because if they do not then it seems improbable that anyone else is going to bother.

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Reference

- 1 Marion Paris. *Library school closings: four case studies*. Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1988