University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Trace: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange

Library Publications and Other Works | University Libraries

1-1-2009

The Imperative for Diversity: ARL's Progress and Role

Barbara I. Dewey
University of Tennessee, Knoxville, bdewey@psu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_libfpubs

Part of the Library and Information Science Commons

Recommended Citation
Dewey, Barbara I., "The Imperative for Diversity: ARL's Progress and Role" (2009). *Library Publications and Other Works.*
http://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_libfpubs/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Libraries at Trace: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Library Publications and Other Works by an authorized administrator of Trace: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact trace@utk.edu.

Project
MUSE®
Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.

EDITORIAL

Shaping the Course of a Profession Festschrift in Honor of Duane E. Webster

Sarah M. Pritchard

In this issue, we take stock of the impact on the field of academic and research librarianship by Duane E. Webster and his work with the Association of Research Libraries from 1970 to 2008. The articles included were presented at a special symposium held at Columbia University in the spring of 2008 in honor of Duane. I welcome *portal* Editor Emeritus Charles Lowry and my colleague on the *portal* editorial board, James Neal, as guest editors for this issue. Their opening editorials give more thoughts on the impressive and wide-ranging contributions that Duane has made over several decades to librarianship, information technology, management studies, information policy, and higher education. It is, however, an unplanned coincidence that Charles, the former editor of *portal*, is now the executive director of the ARL, and I, the current editor, was for a few years an associate director and a program officer at the association. We, thus, share a more personal experience of working with Duane to mobilize a small staff to join with library directors and other leaders across the country to put together an international program of research, advocacy, collaboration, training, and communication.

Amidst the more serious professional assessments presented here, I thought I would personalize this with some observations about Duane Webster as a boss. How does someone known for his skillful management consulting put those ideas into practice? Here are some of the things I learned from watching and working with Duane. These may not have been the things he was trying to teach, but it is a little like the role of an author and the notion of "reader response" literary criticism; once you are done writing, the work is out there, and you cannot control how the reader interprets it.

Take Calculated Risks

It was scary for the first few months I worked at ARL. Duane seemed always to be reaching to launch major initiatives without knowing whether they would work or if the resources would be there after the initial start-up. I soon saw that Duane had good instincts about how to calculate the degree of risk: what support and partners did he

portal: Libraries and the Academy, Vol. 9, No. 3 (2009), pp. 301–303.
Copyright © 2009 by The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD 21218.

have, what did the board and ARL leaders think, or how much would it take for a proof-of-concept that might then lead to a more sustainable funding model. I learned that we have to be willing to take those leaps, trust the knowledge gained from previous projects, and grab opportunities even if the picture is still a little sketchy. And the majority of those leaps resulted in significant new achievements for ARL and research libraries.

Have a Lot of Ideas Percolating at the Same Time

ARL is a very busy place. This is not just due to the constant work on conferences, publications, training, and research but to an ongoing climate of curiosity about current issues and new ideas in libraries, higher education, technology, government, and even the business world. I struggled to stay abreast of these and to respond as Duane would pepper the senior staff with leading phrases like "What do you know about…?" or "I was thinking that we should try to look into…" I learned that, as intimidating as this seeming river of ideas appeared, only a few would gain a foothold and become formal proposals or projects. We did not have to adopt each new idea that we read about or organize an event to debate every issue. Without the initial multiplicity of such interesting ideas, however, it would be harder to see when the ones with real potential rose to the top. The right mix of creativity and timing is more likely to happen if there are always a lot of ideas on the table in varying stages of analysis.

Be Willing to Tolerate a Little Chaos and Uncertainty

The two behavioral maxims that I just outlined combine to create a work environment that may seem chaotic. Duane glided through this space comfortably and collegially, confident of the talents of the staff and of the convergences that would inevitably appear just in time, for example, for the membership meeting. I learned that what mattered most were the results we collectively delivered to our stakeholders. If we all shared the underlying goals, and if what the ARL members received was of high quality, then the fact that individual staff may have idiosyncratic approaches to program development was relatively unimportant. Some details matter and some do not, and they do not all have to be nailed down in advance. As a leader (and someone with an in-depth appreciation for the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator!), Duane could harness the energies of a very diverse clamoring group in order to bring about a virtually seamless final product.

Duane glided through this space comfortably and collegially, confident of the talents of the staff and of the convergences that would inevitably appear just in time.

Always Extend the Circle of Conversation

Duane thrived on all those ideas; he got them from listening to lots of people, and he got things done by engaging even more people in the work at hand. You could not walk

by his office without hearing, "Come in here and talk with us for a few minutes," and enter to find perhaps another staff member, a library director, a foundation officer, or an international visitor. You could not walk up to give him some quiet piece of logistical information at a meeting without having him introduce you to the people standing with him. His collegiality was not only infectious and pleasant, it was also purposeful and effective. He rarely took an exclusionary view of his own role; and, rather than restricting the flow of communication to gain control, he opened up communication to increase engagement and productivity. This is a great management style and a supportive way to train and mentor staff and upcoming leaders.

His collegiality was not only infectious and pleasant, it was also purposeful and effective.

Strategic Thinking Works

Working at ARL was sometimes like inhabiting the pages of a management textbook in which the case studies were all about libraries. Looking at the external environment, Duane was keenly aware of both the threats and the opportunities; and looking at libraries, he could see the strengths and the weaknesses. How could we mobilize the strengths to respond to the opportunities? How could we shore up the weaknesses so as not to be vulnerable to the threats? Of course, he did not phrase it that way, but that was what, years later, I realized he was doing. Duane took ARL to new levels of collaboration with higher education associations, with technology developers, with publishers and with government agencies, as a result of this intense focus on the externalities that shape research libraries. The specifics and successes of those projects are described in more detail in the following pages. The effect that this way of thinking had on the many people employed at ARL—from library school interns to visiting program officers to long-time staff—was to create a dynamic, learning organization that contributed both to the fabric of the profession and to the growth of the individuals who worked there.

Duane took ARL to new levels of collaboration…as a result of this intense focus on the externalities that shape research libraries.

Duane was the kind of boss whose expectations were always clear, who wanted results but who took your questions seriously. He would take you to lunch at his favorite Italian restaurant and tell you about his latest tennis or golf match, all the while giving you more assignments. My time at ARL changed the shape of my career and, I hope, improved my skills as a manager and thinker—largely by watching Duane Webster.

Sarah M. Pritchard is Charles Deering McCormick University Librarian, Northwestern University Library, Evanston, IL; she may be contacted via e-mail at: spritchard@northwestern.edu.