

THE LIBRARY AS ECO

A new way of thinking about the profession embraces the concepts of mutual benefit and coevolution

By Scott Walter

It came as quite a surprise to one of my colleagues when he found out that he was untamed. A licensed architect with almost two decades of professional experience, my colleague is one of the “feral professionals” Jim Neal famously said now populate the academic library (see “Raised by Wolves,” *LJ* 2/15/06, p. 42).

Another colleague, now retired, and a Ph.D. in political science who served several generations of faculty and students as a subject specialist, would have certainly rolled his eyes at being called a “hybrid professional”—a term recently employed by the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) to describe the role played in academic libraries by its Post-doctoral Fellows in Scholarly Information Resources. “Feral professionals,” according to Neal, are individuals employed in professional positions in libraries who have not entered the field through traditional library education programs.

“Hybrid professionals,” according to CLIR, are Ph.D. holders who fill professional positions that require one to “bridge the divide between the library and...academic departments.” Both of these metaphors are engaging, and both have spurred debate among librarians concerned with patrolling the borders

of our field, but neither really reflects the quickly changing, professional landscape of the academic library.

A professional ecosystem

Using geographical metaphors, such as “borders” and “landscape,” isn’t the best way to discuss the future of academic libraries. Rather, it works better to look at libraries in ecological terms. Ecology is the study of interactions between organisms and their environment, and the academic library could be considered to be an ecosystem, i.e., a “biological organization” in which multiple species must interact, both with one another and with their environment. The metaphor of the library as ecosystem is flexible enough to be applied not only to interactions among (and between) library professionals but also to those between library professionals and library users. The library is home to multiple species, and our relations grow more complex every day.

While this metaphor is flexible enough to be applied to a broad spectrum of interactions taking place in our environment, let us focus on the library as professional ecosystem. Are library professionals who don’t hold the M.L.S. degree really “wild”? Is the position held by a Ph.D. in an academic library truly a “hybrid,” i.e., a union of two species resulting in an offspring that is “sterile...[and] unable to reproduce” (*A Dictionary of Environment and Conservation*, Oxford Univ. Pr., 2007)? I hope not! While both of these metaphors may appear to be apt on the surface, each presents a limited view of the true complexity of the professional environment of the 21st-century academic library—an environment that I prefer to think of as being defined not by competition among different species and survival of the fittest but by mutualism and coevolution.

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Competing interests?

Different species in any ecosystem compete for scarce resources, and such competition is an environmental reality all too familiar to anyone working in libraries. Many discussions of the CLIR program, like those of earlier attempts to recruit scholars without the library degree into the profession, focus on competition, i.e., whether Ph.D. holders are taking professional positions that would (or should) otherwise go to traditionally credentialed librarians. Concerns about competition also mark discussions of the integration of “new professions” into the academic library environment, including information technology trainers, accountants, software designers, marketing experts, instructional designers, digital publishing professionals, process improvement specialists, attorneys, and, yes, architects.

Does the rise of “new professionals” in the library represent a weakening of the role of traditionally credentialed librarians? Taken to the extreme, does the recognition that new profes-

and diversity of professional backgrounds and skills engenders strength in the academic library.

The concept of “mutualism” provides a metaphor that allows us to focus on the complementary strengths that different professionals bring to the academic library. It also is much more applicable across the academy—as academic programs of all types recruit faculty with complementary disciplinary backgrounds to foster interdisciplinary inquiry into topics of common interest.

Consider, for example, the instructional services unit at the University of Kansas Libraries, Lawrence (www.lib.ku.edu/instruction). Responsible for designing and delivering information literacy instruction and technology training through a variety of face-to-face and online learning programs familiar to many libraries, this unit is led by a librarian and includes library professionals who provide undergraduate information literacy programs. It also includes information technology pro-

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sional skills are needed in the academic library mean that the species “librarian” cannot survive as we know it? Or does it simply mean that we librarians must evolve in order to thrive in our changing environment? Getting the right mix of professions in the 21st-century academic library is a serious issue, but focusing only on competition, or on a fatalistic view of the evolution of the library profession, is not productive.

Mutual benefit

Like *feral* and *hybrid*, *mutualism* is a term drawn from the life sciences. It describes interactions between the members of two species that benefit both. Bees, for instance, maintain a mutualistic relationship with flowers, as do sea anemones and clownfish (examples drawn from one of our true competitors in the professional ecosystem, Wikipedia, but our topic today is “mutualism,” not “predation”!). Unlike the “feral” metaphor, there is no assumption in a professional ecosystem characterized by mutualism that one species must be “tamed,” or “socialized,” to the norms of another. Unlike the “hybrid” metaphor, there is no assumption that mixing two “pure strains” (e.g., scholar, librarian) results in a “new kind of professional” uniquely suited to the challenges of the contemporary academic environment. In a professional ecosystem characterized by mutualism, the focus is not on competition among professional species but on the “interactions that result in benefits to [all] participating species” (*Encyclopedia of Life Sciences*, Wiley, 2006). Diversity of species engenders strength in the mutualistic ecosystem,

professionals responsible for providing complementary services and programs. This library’s approach weaves support for information literacy, technology literacy, data literacy, and data services together into a seamless whole. Moreover, mutualism in the library reflects mutualism on the campus, where “library” workshops are promoted side by side with “instructional design” workshops provided by another campus unit. In a world where information literacy and information technology fluency are so closely aligned, the efforts of these complementary professional species can’t help but benefit one another. On a campus where responsibility for faculty development efforts is housed in multiple units, there is no better way to support the design and delivery of complementary programs than through a commitment to mutual benefit. Most importantly, a library

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environment marked by such mutualistic relationships can’t help but provide better service to its users.

Further examples of mutualism in the academic library can be found not only in libraries pursuing instructional initiatives but also in those pursuing initiatives in other areas, e.g., organizational development, digital publishing, and scholarly communications. It can be seen in many of the areas of professional work identified by Neal, including strategic communications, fundraising, facilities management, staff training, and data ser-

ices. It is increasingly found in library approaches to delivering programs in collaboration with student affairs professionals and in the development of dynamic, user-centered service programs. Efforts at institutions such as the University of Rochester and the University of Minnesota to incorporate Ph.D. holders with expertise in research methods into assessment and user services initiatives demonstrate the benefit of adding professionals in research design and analysis to the library mix. Taken singly or together, these examples prove that in a library ecosystem characterized by mutualism, benefits accrue not only to library professionals but also to library users.

Evolution, not revolution

If “mutualism” provides a more appropriate metaphor for interprofessional relationships within the academic library enterprise than did Neal’s notion of the “feral,” then “coevolution” provides a better vision for the future of our profession than does CLIR’s notion of the “hybrid.” A hybrid may exhibit strengths unique to its species and found in neither of the original species that contributed to its birth, but it also represents (in some ways) an “end” to the original species. Neither of the parent species evolves into the hybrid form (although, like the horse and the mule, they can coexist). Taking the CLIR metaphor of the Ph.D. holder as representative of the “hybrid professional” in libraries, one may conclude that the hybrid might occupy a professional niche in which neither of its parents could thrive. This may, in fact, be true, but a vision of “coevolution,” in which mutualistic interactions between species result in “reciprocal evolutionary change” (*Encyclopedia of Life Sciences*), is preferable.

In a professional ecosystem characterized by mutualism, complementary professions evolve together, to the benefit of all. Returning to the University of Kansas example, the long-time partnerships among credentialed librarians, information technology professionals, and faculty development professionals provide an opportunity for professional coevolution focused on the design and delivery of direct instructional services to students and faculty. In light of changes to the scholarly communication environment, one can certainly see the benefit (and, indeed, hope for the widespread development) of similarly mutualistic coevolution of the species “librarian” and the species “publisher”—a direction advocated in recent reports by Ithaka and the Association of Research Libraries and found in the professional relationships developed at institutions like Pennsylvania State University, where library professionals and publishing professionals make complementary contributions to the ongoing evolution of the Office of Digital Scholarly Publishing (www.libraries.psu.edu/odsp).

What’s in a name?

As Stanley Wilder has shown in his article “The New Library Professional” in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the rise of the “new professionals” is a fact of life in many academic libraries. Despite the vigorous nature of the current discussion, this is nothing new. The academic library has long been prone to mutualism. Certainly, the Ph.D.-holding, “scholar-librarian” was a familiar example of mutualistic thinking in academic libraries for decades. The trend toward mutualism in our professional environment gained strength with the widespread introduction into our ecosystem of information technology specialists who developed and maintained our online systems. Adoption (overt

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or implicit) of this trend has accelerated over the past decade with the recognition that a variety of organizational priorities—instruction, assessment, and advancement, to name a few—require us to look beyond the confines of “our” profession in order to put together the team best suited to help us meet users’ needs, or, to return to the biological metaphor, to fill our niche in the broader ecosystem of higher education. Given this fact of life, does it matter if we think of this trend as representing the integration of the “feral” into our long-domesticated environment, as an indication that the soil in which we plant our efforts is such that hybrids may thrive or, as I have argued, as an ecosystem characterized by mutualism? As a librarian who also trained as a linguist, I am forced to answer, “Yes.”

The metaphor of the feral professional is an engaging one, and I realize that the point of Neal’s essay was to provoke much-needed discussion, but my architect does not wish to be “tamed,” and my librarians certainly don’t feel as if they have been “domesticated.” The suggestion that the academic library professional who effectively bridges the gap between the classroom faculty and the library represents a “hybrid” is likewise limited—many traditionally credentialed librarians have successfully bridged that gap for years, and the array of roles played in the academic library by library professionals who also hold the Ph.D. degree is complex.

The concept of mutualism provides a way of talking positively and powerfully about the changes currently taking place in the professional environment of the academic librarian. It provides a way to transcend decades-long debates over professional competition and allows us to speak about the span of professional skills that our librarians and our libraries need to hone if we are to remain relevant in a rapidly changing academic environment. Most importantly, thinking of the library as an ecosystem characterized by mutualism allows us to think creatively about the relationships we must foster with other professional species (both within the library and across the campus) in pursuit of common goals.

If we wish to remain essential to the teaching, learning, research, and service missions of our campuses, we must embrace relationships with complementary academic professions that allow us to organize for mutual benefit, and we must pursue interactions among multiple professional species to ensure that we evolve together in such a way that we all can thrive in our new environment. ■

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