

July 2014

Seeking a Balance Between Pragmatism and Probity

Steve Silver
Northwest Christian University

Recommended Citation

Silver, S. (2014). Seeking a Balance Between Pragmatism and Probity. *OLA Quarterly*, 17(3), 13-15.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1331>

© 2014 by the author(s).

OLA Quarterly is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374

Seeking a Balance Between Pragmatism and Probity

by **Steve Silver**

ssilver@nwc.edu

Director of Kellenberger Library/
Assistant Professor,
Northwest Christian University

One prevailing theme in much of the library science literature these days, and rightly so, is concern about the future of the library. Shrinking institutional and governmental budgets, and a misperception by some that libraries are obsolete in the Internet age, lead many to worry that libraries are being marginalized. This is as true in academia, where I work, as in any other library sector. Browse any library journal, peruse the session topics at library association conferences, scour the lists of professional development webinars, and you will find articles, workshops, and other “how-tos” to help those of us in library leadership “make the case” for the library to our respective government or institutional leaderships. We are told we must demonstrate our worth and argue for our value or risk losing out on the resources our libraries need in order to offer quality services and resources to our clientele. Shrinking resources mean we must learn how to compete with other units for funding, resources, and legitimacy.

Such approaches do have their place and usefulness in our present environment. But the theme of this quarter’s OLAQ—service—reminds me that thinking competitively is not the only way to validate our worth to those who make funding and resource decisions for us. I am reminded that service to others can win over more hearts and minds than finely crafted arguments, statistics, and charts. More importantly, I am reminded that service is at the very heart of what we do. Arguing, proving, and jockeying for influence may be important, but they are not core. Service is core.

As librarians we tend to do service well. We are partially drawn to this field as a way to serve others. Individually—especially in difficult funding times—we understand and practice good service as central to our mission. However, as a library leader in the midst of advocating for my library’s needs, I sometimes struggle to remember that, in addition to students and individuals, the library itself also serves the larger institution of which it is a part. An academic library serves the needs and mission of the college or university to which it is attached. A school library serves the needs and mission of the school and district of which it is a part. Even a public library has an opportunity to be a service to the other departments within its governing hierarchy. Yes, ultimately we serve our clients. But, particularly for an academic library, the library itself as an institution, as an entity, serves the needs of the college or university. The academic library is not an entity unto itself; it exists as part of a larger organization and it exists to support the goals and objectives of that larger organization.

As a person of faith working for an institution that places faith at the heart of what it does, I am particularly reminded of this calling to service, both individually and as an organizational entity. It is easy to see the connection on the individual level. My faith calls me to serve others, to place the needs of others above my own. Of course this translates well into serving my library’s clients to the best of my ability. That calls me to give the best service I can whether at the circulation desk, in a reference transaction, or as a library leader planning for services and resources to serve the needs of our users.

As a person of faith, I also believe my faith calls me to lead my library, as an organizational entity, in an attitude of service to the larger organization, not an attitude of competition for resources or attention. It is not always an easy path. It is a real test of faith to maintain a humble, serving attitude within the larger organization and trust that the needs of the students and of the library will work out in the end. Some may see such an approach as folly. Humbleness and service-oriented attitudes can imply weakness. It certainly can feel counter-



intuitive. I believe it is also, in the long run, more effective. We can prove our value—individually as professionals and corporately as a library—by providing high quality service. We prove our value, in essence, by doing our jobs to the best of our ability. Deans, administrators, and decision makers may well remember the special effort made to provide an un-asked-for resource, or to make those student workers available to help with another department’s office move, or simply to treat them as persons not positions when we ask about vacations, or families, or favorite hobbies. Such service can reap rewards down the road.

It is easy, of course, to fall into the trap of serving because it will provide benefit for the library. If I support a department’s need for a faculty position in the budget meeting, then that dean may be more likely to vote for the library’s budget needs in the next meeting. If I go above and beyond in providing instruction to a class, that instructor may be more likely to understand the value of—and support the library’s need for—resources to increase instruction. If I “play nice” with my dean—ask about his family, laugh at his jokes, volunteer to serve on that odious committee—then maybe he’ll be more sympathetic when I argue for a larger share of the funding pie for the library. Such indeed can be the outcome of genuine service to individuals in positions of influence. But if that is the only motivation, is it really “service”? My faith calls me to those very same acts of service, but with no expectation of reward or payback. My faith calls me to those very same acts of service to persons not in a position of influence: to serve the admissions counselor, the grounds keeper, the student development officer, and the public patron with no connection to our school. What can I do, both as a librarian and as a person, to make their lives better, with no thought of how it might benefit me or the library down the road?

There is an equal danger to treat the call to service as an invitation to be a doormat, to avoid conflict, and to abdicate responsibility. Resources are limited, and I truly, firmly, and ardently believe that the library deserves a significant share of those resources. This is not simply to increase my own little library empire, but because I believe that having good library resources is best for students. My best service to students may be arguing strong and hard for those needed library resources, or bringing the best charts and graphs I can to demonstrate the positive impact of good information literacy training. Other departments are doing the same, and I do a disservice to our students and our library if I do not make the case that needs to be made. At times, arguing, proving, and jockeying for influence may be the best service I can provide, both to our students and to the larger institution.

Reality, of course, is most often a mix. I do care about my dean as a person. I ask about his vacation, their recent move, their daughter’s growing up, as one person to another. I provide what support I can to help take the tremendous load off of him because I see a human being struggling to keep up with it all, and I can relate. I also do those things because he is my dean and I want him to have positive thoughts when he considers my requests for library resources and funding. I look at institutional issues that arise and try to support what seems best for the school overall, not just what benefits the library directly. It is not an either/or, good/bad dichotomy. It is a matter of balance and motivation. If my primary motivation is simply serving another person in need, then positive results can ensue. If I serve only in order to get those positive results, my service has become disingenuous. As a library leader I am interested in doing whatever I can to generate a positive climate for decisions that will best support the library and student informational needs. But this should come



secondary to a desire to simply be of service in whatever way I, or the library I lead, can. That may mean giving support to a new faculty position when library staffing has been cut, if that faculty position truly meets the needs of the university better. It may mean supporting increased funding for admissions or student development when library funding has been cut, if those increases truly benefit the larger institution more effectively. Positive results may come back to the library in the long term, but in the meantime I simply try to serve and let the consequences be what they will be.

It is not easy. It is a difficult balance to find at times, serving my faith while advocating for my library's needs. I often find myself "unbalanced" on one side or the other. It is a lifelong process.

I would love to hear others' thoughts on these subjects. How—and, more importantly, why—do you serve those in the larger institution outside your library? How does your library as an entity serve the parent organization of which it is a part, even perhaps at the expense of immediate library needs? Where and why do you disagree with my assessment? How does your faith or life-perspective—whatever it may be—impact how you serve others within your professional role? I would love to hear from you. We can engage in dialogue and challenge and improve each other's thinking as we journey this path together. 

