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## The enemy is us: Political life and academic librarians in Oregon

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# The Enemy is Us:

## *Political Life and Academic Librarians in Oregon*

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When asked to write this before the November election, I wondered how to wax eloquent enough to persuade academic librarians to involve themselves in the political process in this state. After all, in my thoughts, the rationale seems obvious and not in need of promulgation. No matter where we work, we are all part of a larger group, defined by town, county, church, or school. To remain inside the proverbial ivy-covered walls of our academic institutions seems insipid in these days, particularly as boundaries in higher education are falling themselves. The concepts of "campus" and "residential students" are changing tenfold in this state. With this redefining, it seems easier to understand that we academic librarians are part of a bigger whole. And, indeed to the public, the citizens of this state, a library is a library; few people make the distinction among the types we define for ourselves.

A few quite logical arguments spring to mind in this quest for political activism among all librarians in Oregon. For one, this is a small state in terms of inhabitants. Demography matters. In this state, political actions and measures passed impact us more visibly than perhaps would occur in more populous states. And, there are few librarians over all in this state; so to dissect us into special, public, school or academic diffuses any positive impact on the legislative environment.

Another argument seems perforce beyond logic when one contemplates the passage of Measure 47. Many of us have children in public schools, many of us work in publicly funded institutions; we are the public. We use all these services. We grew up with a certain expectation of the responsibility of the government to provide services for its citizens. Although at this point in time, just weeks past the election, no one knows exactly how Measure 47 will be interpreted and put into action by the legislature; and, no one can expect her community to remain untouched.

Moreover, public and school libraries are part of the larger educational context of our culture. Historically, public libraries ushered many immigrants into this "melting pot" (now more often referred to as a "tossed salad"). (Read *Apostles of Culture* for a stun-

ning history of librarianship as public entity.) We in higher education wish for students to begin their forays into information gathering, selection, and evaluation before they enter higher education. All of us benefit by having a foundation of public literacy and free access to information – a cornerstone of civic life in the United States.

A more pragmatic reason to act politically is that the checks are in the mail which reimburse net-lenders in this state. This radical piece of legislation would never have been approved without the support of all the divisions of the Oregon Library Association. This payment is part of the Oregon LINK program which also offers regional reference referral service throughout the state. We all would never have managed both net-lender reimbursement and reference referral centers without participating as a group in the political process.

So, come to Legislative Day in Salem in February. Come see the balloons and children's story times which will demonstrate the educational, positive influence of public libraries. Come speak with your legislator. Legislators listen to constituents who make the effort to talk. All is not lost with the passage of Measure 47, but ground must be gained and creative solutions must be arrived at.

Remember that children, students, and people of all ages matter. Remember that we owe it to ourselves as librarians as well as citizens of Oregon to work for the common good. We are a part of a civic culture founded upon participation in this democratic government. As Robert Bellah, author of *Habits of the Heart* and eloquent spokesperson for civic culture in this country, puts it in the November 28, 1996 "New York Review of Books" (p. 65):

"Our civic tradition has emphasized that we are all members of a common society. Our labor tradition has called us to solidarity with our fellow workers. Our religious tradition has told us that we are members of the same body."

Finally, remember Carnegie's words: "public libraries are the university for the common man."

See you in Salem. ☐

### REFERENCES

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