
Volume 7
Number 3
Vision 2010 (Fall 2001)

July 2014

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Recommended Citation

Devlin, M., & Goodrich, J. (2014). It's Our Choice. *OLA Quarterly*, 7(3), 2-3. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1587>

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

Editorial

It's Our Choice

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If libraries don't change, they won't be around much longer. That's the straight story.

When the Vision 2010 Committee began its work last year, we did the traditional planning thing. Vision, goals, objectives, activities—you know, we could have just numbed your neurons. We would have met our obligation, we all would have had another incremental plan to refer to—and we could all kiss the libraries we love good-bye.

Instead, our research and reflection told us to scare the library paste out of you, as it has out of us. We don't want to fiddle while Oregon libraries go down in flames. We don't want to be nice; we want to get your attention.

Here's the deal: if we don't change, and quick, we can all just work with our PERS counselors and let this phenomenal institution become a future Disney attraction. Meanwhile, our grandkids will pay Questia or its successors \$19.95 a month and access all they need to get a college education.

"Whoa," you ask, "what got their Cutter tables in a tangle?" Let's focus on the context. The Vision 2010 Committee had the charge to "develop a road map for the next decade." To do this we looked at both the external environment—what's happening in Oregon—and at our internal environment—what's happening in Oregon libraries and what's happening within the profession nationally. What we discovered was pretty scary. (For the full reports, see <http://www.olaweb.org/v2010/>)

The demographics in Oregon are changing. There will be a lot more of us here with a growing number of elders and, at the same time, a booming and much younger Hispanic population. There is an increasing income gap—the rich getting much richer and everyone else losing ground. A high dropout rate feeds economic, educational and opportunity disparities.

What remains the same? There's the "Willamette Valley versus the rest of

Oregon" issue. Jobs and the wealth band continue to be concentrated down the valley. There's the built-in uncertainty of our political process with ballot measures, initiative petitions and all the rest—continuing economic uncertainty for public institutions is a likely result.

What does all this mean? Increased political volatility seems likely, not just with geographic segments but also with age segments, economic segments and ethnic segments. This doesn't bode well for libraries as they continue to have to compete for scarce resources. Throw in increasing competition from the private sector and it looks downright grim for libraries that carry on with business as usual.

What's been going on in Oregon libraries? Both public and academic libraries' resources have generally improved in the last ten years—but not enough to really keep pace with needs. At the same time school libraries are disappearing in many districts. There is a growing demand for added-value services and for virtual services without much money to do them.

Consolidations and mergers have changed the price and pricing structure of publishers and vendors. Publishers are attacking libraries as being unfair. Their attack on fair use and the threat of UCITA legislation can alter the foundations of how libraries do business.

Then there is the approaching retirement bulge. Who will replace those retiring? Who will be the new leaders in our libraries? New recruits to librarianship are often opting out of libraries to work in other areas of the information industry. Developing a diverse staff is very difficult even as the general population becomes more diverse.


There's a slow rumble building under our feet and it's economic, technological, political and demographic. It's within the library/vendor/publisher environment and it's coming from outside factors and influences.

Things have been going reasonably well in the past few years. That makes this one of the most dangerous times yet for libraries.



Complacency will not do. The future existence of libraries depends upon the choices we make and the risks we take, now.

If you think this is blunt, consider the *Washington Post* feature article written during midwinter 2001. "We don't need no stinking libraries," asserts the reporter, after describing the vast array of Web resources now available. Then he goes on to ask the question that actually was on everyone's lips at the conference: "Do we need libraries anymore?" Rivkah Sass, Multnomah County Library's reference coordinator, gathering materials for the PLA Spring Symposium, asked a slightly different question: "Will libraries as we know them be around in twenty years?" Many didn't think so. Others thought at best it might be a bit longer than twenty years.

We could join in ALA President Nancy Kranich's response and intone that libraries are needed now more than ever. That may be true, but your OLA Vision 2010 Committee thinks we must confront other realities. We mean business—and that's the necessary business of active planning, marketing and changing. Let's choose our future and work together to make it happen. 

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How?

The first step is to read on. We have some ideas. And we invite you to join us in thinking differently about the work we do, how we do it and who does it.

Read On...

Jane Beaumont's "Is Your Library 'Edgy?' Strategies for Thriving in the Future"
<http://fox.nstn.ca/~jbeaumont/edgy.html>

Glimpses into the future with Reva Basch, Timothy M. Andrews and Clifford Lynch.
http://www.infotoday.com/searcher/jan00/movers_shakers.htm

Stephen Arnold on Millennium Angst, new rules and technologies to watch.
<http://www.infotoday.com/searcher/jan00/arnold.htm>

Are people using the Internet? Using the public library? Or both? Results of a 2000 survey are at:
<http://www.urbanlibraries.org/Internet%20Study%20Fact%20Sheet.html>
and in:
American Libraries, May 2001, pp. 58-61

Oregon's population increased 20 percent in the 1990s, making us the 11th-fastest-growing state. Many counties saw a doubling or tripling Hispanic population. Retirees accounted for significant growth in Central Oregon and along the California border.
<http://www.usatoday.com/news/census/or.htm>

Crucial technologies and trends to watch from John Guscott.
<http://www.libraryfutures.com/freereports/technology.htm>

For your toolkit—the Library Foresight System.
<http://www.libraryfutures.com/lfs.htm>

Between 1998 and 2000 Oregonians' public library use dropped in all age groups. Overall 59 percent of Oregonians said they used a public library in the past year, compared to 65 percent in 1998.
<http://www.econ.state.or.us/opb/>

Oregon Environmental Scan
(Jeanne Goodrich)
<http://www.olaweb.org/v2010/scan1.pdf>

Scan of Oregon Libraries (Ruth Metz)
<http://www.olaweb.org/v2010/scan2.pdf>

Trends in the Library Profession
(Janet Webster et al.)
<http://www.olaweb.org/v2010/trends.html>



Live in the present.
Stretch out the past.
Reach into the future.

