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Vision 2010: Knife Edge Ridge

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Vision 2010

The Knife Edge Ridge

There are many terms mountain climbers use. One descriptive phrase is “the knife edge ridge.” These precarious places are usually close to the summit, where the exposure is maximum. On either side of the ridge, the slopes drop off precipitously. The only way to reach your goal is to focus—move deliberately, but move quickly. Don’t delay, because a storm could move in, the snow could get soft, nightfall could obscure your vision.

The knife edge ridge might describe the place between where libraries are now, and where we would like them to be in the next several years. In 1999, the OLA Executive Board charged a Vision 2010 Committee to develop a road map for the next decade. The committee took a rational strategic approach to the planning process. We conducted three environmental scans to provide us with a context. What was Oregon’s population going to look like? What about the economy? How was technology going to affect people’s access to information? What recruitment challenges did we face in the next decade? How will the political climate affect copyright law, database content, Internet availability in public libraries?

The next phase of the process began in a predictable time-honored fashion. State the vision. Outline the goals and objectives. Then describe a set of action plans associated with each objective. After several months of struggling with planning terminology and trying to cover all aspects of library service, the committee experienced an epiphany. Libraries no longer

had a lock on the information dissemination business. Casual readers and serious researchers had other more convenient options. The print-on-paper world gave us a comfortable monopoly. We could say to our users, “Come to us and do it our way.” Our committee’s real challenge was to describe how libraries had to transform to become successful in a competitive environment.

What does this brave new competitive world look like? In the past week alone, three things happened that help to describe both the pace and the nature of this changing world. First, *Amazon.com* announced a new service called e-Documents. Customers can download and print research reports on innovative investment and marketing strategies; the latest research on e-commerce and telecommunications technology; reports on computer programming, web development, media technologies, and network applications. Second, the *Learning Network* and *ebrary* launched the first public beta of ebrarian™, a system designed to select the most relevant content and to securely deliver high-value business and economics titles to its communities of students, consumers and professionals. You pay only if you want to print. And third, at the University of Oregon Library, a student walked into the office asking for “lost and found.” “What did you lose?” we asked. The student struggled to find the right word and finally said, “It’s like a hand-held spell-checker.” The student had lost his dictionary, but he could only describe it using online vocabulary.

While these events may seem daunting, there are also many developments that are encouraging. The Library of Congress, OCLC, and several major libraries across the country are experimenting with 24x7 online reference service. The technical barriers that used to prohibit users from searching across different catalog systems are being eliminated. Research libraries and faculty are collaborating to create new digital libraries and alternative methods of scholarly publishing. Document delivery systems are getting faster, cheaper, better.

The library community has not been standing still while the world around has been changing rapidly. But a steady pace of incremental change may not be sufficient to secure a place in the future. We need to take some giant steps as well. In the following pages, you will not see a long list of goals, objectives, and action statements. Instead, Vision 2010 has focussed on a few giant steps that we think will help libraries remain at the center of our communities and campuses as primary providers of information services (see *A Call to Action for the Oregon Library Association*, page 21). To provide the reader with food for thought, we have included several different scenarios of our future.

Reaching our vision—like reaching any summit—takes commitment, energy, and a keen awareness of the environment. The journey is not always easy, but the end is worth the effort.

—Deborah Carver,
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Guest Editor