

# Working for a Change

by Duncan Smith

**T**he one issue around which librarianship is most likely to reach consensus is the issue of change. An overwhelming majority of the profession acknowledges and admits that in order to survive, the profession must change. The exact nature and direction of this change are open for debate. This is where the profession's consensus comes apart and we each go off into our separate corners, either by ourselves or with the faction of our choice. There is nothing alarming about this picture of our professional behavior. In fact, this has been the profession's status quo. This issue of *North Carolina Libraries* illustrates the wide range of opinion about the need for change that exists in our profession.

In his article, Howard McGinn argues that libraries and librarians must become full partners of the new information infrastructure or become extinct. His article is an organizational perspective calling for significant change in the way our organizations interact and connect with their constituencies. On the other hand, in their article, Ilene Nelson, Johannah Sherrer, and Ken Berger provide us with a view of the change that needs to occur in the reference department of the library itself. Their article is the more personal of the two and focuses on the changes that need to occur within the individual. These two articles illustrate the breadth of change that needs to occur within the profession. The profession needs to change at both the overall organizational level and within the individual members of the profession. These authors demonstrate that professional survival depends on the profession changing from top to bottom no matter which way you stand the pyramid.

What is missing from these two articles and what is missing from most of the profession's discussion of change is not the what or why, but the how. The profession is proficient at discussing and arguing for change, but it has not become adept at achieving it. Librarianship is not alone in this. How to achieve significant and last-

ing change in both organizations and individuals is at the heart of the debate that is raging throughout the country. It is the issue that will become a centerpiece in our soon to be held Presidential election.

## A Case Study

Both McGinn and Nelson stress the importance of information and information services in their articles. Both authors focus on the provision of these services as a hallmark of the profession, and fear that information services will be one of the first losses incurred by the profession as it moves down the road to extinction. Given the centrality of these services to the profession and the emphasis given them by these authors, one would assume that this is an area in which the profession would be struggling to ensure its proficiency. A large body of evidence exists to the contrary. In fact, according to existing research, the profession provides an accurate answer to requests for information only fifty-five percent of the time. This is not new information; it has been known for a long time. It is indicative of the profession's attitude toward making change that the fifty-five percent rule has been allowed to remain the profession's status quo.

A time line of published research on unobtrusive reference will illustrate this point. The first five entries in this time line are taken from Terence Crowley's "Half-Right Reference: Is It True?"<sup>1</sup>

1968: Terence Crowley completes his dissertation at Rutgers on the unobtrusive measurement of reference services. He finds that the librarians in his sample answer questions with a 54.2 percent accuracy rate.

1971: Thomas Childers refines, expands, and verifies Crowley's work. Scarecrow Press publishes Childers' and Crowley's work in a book.

1978: Childers expands on his own work in a much larger and refined study. He publishes his results in a journal article.

1981: McClure and Hernon use unobtrusive methodology in a study of the effectiveness of government documents departments. This is the first example of the use of this methodology to evaluate and improve practice.

1983: Maryland State Library conducts a state-wide assessment of reference accuracy in Maryland's public libraries.

1985: Ralph Gers and Lillie J. Seward publish the results of the Maryland Study in *Library Journal*. This article identifies the six behaviors that improve reference accuracy.<sup>2</sup>

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1986: Maryland State Library develops and trains two hundred Maryland librarians in the use of the six behaviors that improve reference accuracy.<sup>3</sup>

1986: Maryland State Library conducts a second unobtrusive study to assess the effectiveness of its training. This second study revealed that reference accuracy had improved to seventy-seven percent.<sup>4</sup>

1986: Patsy Hansel's article on the results of an unobtrusive study of reference accuracy at Cumberland County Public Library and Information

Center (CCPL&IC) is published in North Carolina Libraries. Hansel reports an accuracy score of 74.7 percent at CCPL&IC.<sup>5</sup>

1988: Sandy Stephan publishes an article in *Public Libraries* describing the Maryland training and its effectiveness.<sup>6</sup>

1991: The Reference and Adult Services Section of the North Carolina Library Association begins planning a train-the-trainer institute to begin introducing the "Maryland Model" into libraries in North Carolina.

1992: Thirty North Carolina librarians are trained in the Maryland Model with the express purpose of introducing the six model reference behaviors into their libraries and other libraries in North Carolina.

1992: Laura Isenstein publishes an article in *Library Journal* describing the incorporation of the six model reference behaviors into Baltimore County Public Library's performance evaluation process.<sup>7</sup>

### *The "How" of Change*

This time line is a case study of how our profession changes. First of all, library researchers begin development of a methodology and conduct studies which provide an accurate picture of some aspect of professional practice. In this case, the picture is of the profession's ability to respond accurately to requests for information. The results of these investigations are reported in the professional literature. In this case, a book is published and the first of a series of articles discussing these investigations is published. It is important to note that four years pass between Crowley's work and the publication of this work in the book that describes his work and the work of Childers. It is also important to note that the first article to appear in the professional literature about this work is Childers', and it appears ten years after Crowley completes his dissertation on the unobtrusive evaluation of reference service.

The next step in the profession's change process is the use of the methodology to improve practice. The first instance where the work of Crowley and Childers is actually used to describe and recommend change in professional practice occurs in 1983, fifteen years after Crowley began his work. The second instance of the use of this work to improve practice begins in 1983 and culminates in 1986, when the State Library of Maryland completes its first round of training in the six model

reference behaviors.

The Maryland experience needs further elaboration. First of all, the State Library of Maryland did not just replicate the work of Crowley and Childers. The State Library of Maryland improved on unobtrusive methodology by focusing not only on measuring accuracy but identifying those behaviors which lead to librarians providing an accurate answer to a request for information.<sup>8</sup> Once these behaviors had been identified, a training program was developed to assist Maryland librarians in using these behaviors on the job to improve their performances. Once this training had been implemented, a follow up study was conducted to evaluate the training program's effectiveness in improving reference accuracy in Maryland.

Two additional points of interest are that in both Maryland and North Carolina a decision was made to develop trainers to expand the availability of the training. Secondly, further follow-up studies by the State Library of Maryland revealed that follow-up and refresher training sessions had to be conducted to ensure that the six model reference behaviors were consistently applied. Without this follow-up and refresher training the use of the behavior declined.<sup>9</sup> An extension of this need for reinforcement of the model behaviors led Baltimore County Public Library to integrate the model behaviors into its performance evaluation process.

At this point, a total of twenty-four years has elapsed since Crowley's initial work. The training of North Carolina librarians in the six model reference behaviors identified by the State Library of Maryland is beginning this year. Six years after the citizens of Maryland began having their questions answered accurately seventy-seven percent of the time, there is no evidence to indicate that the citizens of North Carolina are getting anything better than "half-right reference."

### *Change: A Systems Perspective*

What is remarkable about the "Maryland Model" time line is not that the discussed outcomes took twenty-four years to occur. Nor is it remarkable that these outcomes have only occurred in certain pockets of the profession. What is remarkable about the "Maryland Model" time line is that the outcomes occurred at all! The chain of events that led to a statewide reference accuracy score of seventy-seven percent are characterized by happenstance and are the results of highly individualized and unique actions.

Without the work of Crowley and Childers, the methodology for the State of

Maryland's study would not have existed. Without the interest of personnel at the Maryland State Library, the six model reference behaviors would not have been identified. Without the staff development and training expertise of other Maryland State Library personnel, the training program responsible for the diffusion of the six model reference behaviors throughout Maryland would not have been developed. Without the publication of the results of these studies and efforts, the Reference and Adult Services Section of the North Carolina Library Association would not have learned of the "Maryland Model." Without the interest and funding of the North Carolina Library Association, the training institute that resulted in thirty North Carolina librarians becoming qualified trainers in the six model reference behaviors would not have occurred. Without the interest of these librarians and

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their employers, the bodies needed for the training institute would not have been available. Without these individuals, the citizens of North Carolina would continue to receive accurate answers to their questions only fifty-five percent of the time.

Several of the authors in this issue of *North Carolina Libraries* imply that if the profession does not change, it will not endure. If the profession is to move from talking about change to doing it, it must recognize how change occurs. As indicated by the above case study the following steps are part of our profession's change system:

1. An accurate picture of some aspect of professional practice is achieved through research.
2. Based on this picture, strategies for improving practice are identified.
3. A technique for communicating and enabling librarians to incorporate these strategies into their practice is developed and implemented.

4. A mechanism for ensuring the continued and consistent utilization of these strategies is in place.

These four steps are basic to our profession's change system. While this change system may exist in other contexts, it is unique in our profession. It is unique to our profession in the sense that it belongs to us. It is a system that is decentralized. It is a system for which no one agency, organization, institution, or individual has responsibility.

### Who Is Responsible

An examination of one of our profession's change tasks sheds some light on the responsibility issue. The major techniques available for communicating and enabling librarians to incorporate new strategies into their practice are continuing education and staff development. Yet continuing education and staff development are our profession's foster children. They have no permanent home in our profession. They spend their lives moving from one temporary residence to another, finding a momentary resting place in this library school, or that state library, in this section of a professional association, or in that library.

Every aspect of our profession admits that it has some responsibility for continuing education. Library schools, professional associations, state libraries, employers and librarians all admit that they have some responsibility for continuing education. Yet none of these components of our profession will admit to having continuing education as its primary purpose. Each of these components, however, can, when asked, tell you who does have primary responsibility for continuing education, and it is always someone other than the component to which you are speaking.

Given the current environment, it is unlikely that any of the agencies mentioned above will adopt continuing education and staff development as its primary responsibility. Given the nature of the change system and its elements, it is also unlikely that any one agency could incorporate all of the skills, competencies, and interests needed to ensure that meaningful and lasting change occurs in the profession. This does not doom librarianship to being a profession in which change does not occur. It simply means that when we stop talking about change and settle down to doing it, we must own the limitations of our profession's change system. The major limitation of the profession's change system is that no one is in charge. This means that those individuals who would initiate

change in the profession must pay particular attention to the change tasks outlined above. These same individuals must also remember that it does not matter so much who does each of the tasks. What matters is that the tasks are done. Without attention to all four of them meaningful and lasting change is not likely to occur.

### Who Will Change

Another aspect of change that the profession is reluctant to discuss is *who* will change. When change is called for, it is usually called for in sweeping, profession-wide terms. It is usually phrased in terms of "us" and "them." The speaker calling for change and the audience hearing him or her becomes the "us." The remainder of the profession becomes the "them." An interesting variation on this theme is the profession's reliance on "new blood" to produce the change it requires.

At least three major documents have been issued during the past two years which call for sweeping change in the profession. These documents are "The Statement of the Decade of the Librarian 1990-2000" produced by the American Library Association as part of its strategic planning process; *Information 2000: Library and Information Services for the 21st Century*, the summary report of the 1991 White House Conference on Library and Information Services; and "Strategic Vision for Professional Librarians," a document produced by the Strategic Visions Steering Committee. Like the articles in this issue, these documents all call for sweeping professional change and tie change to professional survival. An examination of the major strategies of these documents to produce change is illuminating. In all three cases, the recruitment of a new type of individual to the profession is a key strategy. In all three cases, continuing education and staff development receive some mention, but only in a minor way. These three documents suggest that in order for the profession to change, "new blood" must be introduced into it. While this is a useful secondary strategy, it is doomed to failure as a primary strategy.<sup>10</sup>

The new recruit strategy also implies some interesting assumptions about the majority of us who are currently working in the profession. It implies that the profession's leadership has largely written us off. It implies that those who are concerned about professional survival feel that the best chance for this survival rests with a "new" few instead of with those of us who are already here.

### Terminus

These fears of the profession's leadership, the ones regarding the reluctance of the vast majority of us to change, are not unfounded. There are those of us who will not change. There are, however, those of us who will.

Librarianship is a hierarchical and bureaucratic profession. It is a profession with a place for everything and a profession that prefers everything in its place. The major barrier to change in our profession is not resistance to it. The major barrier to change in our profession is that change has no place in it. No single agency or institution whose primary focus is change exists in our profession. As the "Maryland Model" case study shows, when change occurs it occurs through the involvement of several elements of our profession. It occurs through the efforts, visions, and work of several individuals who may never meet, who may never know each other.

Our profession's change system requires the networking of a variety of individuals, agencies, and resources. It requires that attention be paid to the change process and to the tasks that are required to ensure lasting and significant change. It requires our moving as individuals and as coalitions across the traditional institutional and attitudinal boundaries of our profession. It requires our coming together to talk about a change and our coming together to begin working for a change.

### References

- <sup>1</sup>Terence Crowley, "Half-Right Reference: Is It True?" *RQ* 25, 1 (Fall 1985): 59-68.
- <sup>2</sup>Ralph Gers and Lillie J. Seward, "Improving Reference Performance: Results of a Statewide Study," *Library Journal* 110, 18 (November 15, 1985): 32-35.
- <sup>3</sup>Sandy Stephan, et al., "Reference Breakthrough in Maryland," *Public Libraries* 27, 4 (Winter 1988): 202-203.
- <sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 202.
- <sup>5</sup>Patsy Hansel, "Unobtrusive Evaluation for Improvement: The CCPL&IC Experience," *North Carolina Libraries* 44, 2 (Summer 1986): 69-75.
- <sup>6</sup>Stephan, 202.
- <sup>7</sup>Laura Isenstein, "Get Your Reference Staff on the STAR Track," *Library Journal* 117, 7 (April 15, 1992): 34-37.
- <sup>8</sup>Gers and Seward, 32-33.
- <sup>9</sup>Lillie J. Dyson, "Reference Accuracy Survey," *The Crab* (Fall 1991): 7.
- <sup>10</sup>Duncan Smith, "The Greening of Librarianship: Toward A Human Resource Development Ecology," *Journal of Library Administration* (forthcoming).