

# Political Realities: Implications For Learning Resource Centers

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Political realities are sets of givens, and politics can be viewed as the use of strategy to accomplish goals, given a particular set of realities. The realities which we are facing in higher education are governed by the economic and social conditions of the times; hence, our realities are a mixture of political, societal, and economic circumstances. What is a societal reality sometimes comes about as a result of economic realities; sometimes it is the other way around. One thing is certain though; these realities are having, and can increasingly expect to have, an impact on the community college.

## Background

The comprehensive community college as we know it today is a relatively recent phenomenon. It was originally conceived as an extension of high school education and, not surprisingly, high school traditions have had a strong influence in shaping community colleges. These traditions include the concepts that:

- (1) the colleges are tuition-free, or virtually so;
- (2) they are "open door" institutions, for all to attend;
- (3) they are primarily locally supported and locally controlled;
- (4) the emphasis is on teaching — with the concept of the master teacher and master motivator paramount;
- (5) they are institutions with an emphasis on student personnel, counselling and guidance with recognition of the individual student;
- (6) they are comprehensive institutions, including college transfer, vocational-technical programs, general education, adult education, and community education.<sup>1</sup>

Just 35 years ago, President Truman's Commission on Higher Education first publicized the "community college." The Commission talked about democratizing higher education and laid the way for voter support of colleges located in the cities where the people were, where tuition would be low or free, where teachers would teach and not do research, where counselling would help students make right choices, and where the doors would be open to all.<sup>2</sup>

For a variety of economic reasons, which are addressed later, we are being forced to re-examine our views on "democratizing higher education." What do you do when there is not enough money to go around for local and state supported services? Community colleges have traditionally been supported largely by local and state taxes. Education has been viewed as a "public good;" the

benefits are considered to accrue to society as a whole. "While education is directly beneficial to individuals, the spillover of benefits are of such social importance that the cost of primary and secondary education, (and community colleges to a large extent,) is supported by general tax revenues."<sup>3</sup> Marilyn Gell in the January 1, 1979, issue of *Library Journal* describes how trends toward new tax sources (to make up for ceilings placed on property taxes) will place an increased reliance on user fees (tuition) at an accelerated rate. Those who favor this approach to allocating scarce resources maintain that the use of pricing for a service provides a mechanism for determining how much demand there really is, and distributes costs more equitably.

Some people believe that to charge increased tuition fees for community colleges would improve the state's ability to compete with private institutions. Proponents of this view would claim that "one of the perversions of tax support of public institutions is a redistribution of effective income from lower to higher income groups. Some authorities argue, for instance, that institutions like community colleges that are used primarily by middle class students, yet supported by all, might make higher education available more equitably by charging close to full cost, while providing generous financial assistance to those needing it."<sup>4</sup>

## A Litany of Realities

Underlying all else, we are beginning to face a challenge to the philosophy of the community's college's role in democratizing higher education.

Some other realities which affect our world are:

1. Stabilized budgets, coupled with inflation. As a result of this:
  - Learning Resource Centers will be competing with other parts of the institution for the dollars that will be available.
  - While some activities within an institution can be cut to reflect a changing environment, e.g., reallocation of parts of the physical plant for other purposes, the LRC activity is an ever increasing one. Each year still more materials are added requiring space, maintenance, and staff to organize and service them.
  - The dollars that are available will not do as much. Inflation, which has touched just about all spheres of life, the hand-held calculator notwithstanding, has been felt more harshly by LRC's as the cost of books, journals, and non-print materials has escalated out of proportion to other cost increases. The most recent data available, clearly explained in the January 22, 1979, issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, states that the rate of inflation for libraries has been double the general rate of the higher education index annually for the last several years. It has been hovering in the 16 or 17 percent range.<sup>5</sup>
  - Energy costs have increased and can be expected to continue to increase.
2. Student enrollment, which had been increasing rapidly up until the 60's, has leveled out and will begin to decrease. The number of 18-year-olds, and consequently the number of high school graduates, will decrease 14-15 percent between 1975 and 1985.<sup>6</sup> However, in 1970 one in six of all students enrolled in post-secondary schools for the first time selected a

vocational program that did not lead to a degree. The ratio went up to one in four by 1975.<sup>7</sup>

3. Composition of the student body will change.

The characteristics of the traditional college-age (18-24) population will change:

—by 1985 that population will include higher proportions of Black and Hispanic youth.

—more college age women than men are now enrolling.

—more college students are delaying college entry for several years.

—more are enrolling at community colleges.

—if older (age 25 and over) students and college age women continue to enroll at high rates, the decline in the number of college age students may be offset.<sup>8</sup>

—An older student population will need flexible postsecondary educational opportunities; more college students are choosing part time study.

The impact of this was well stated by Sarah Thomson when she wrote:

The number of full-time equivalent students determines the college income, and therefore the proportionate income that can be expanded for learning resources. But the learning resources staff must deal with the *total* number of warm bodies. There are that many individuals who must be taught: how to use the card catalog, where the materials are, how to use equipment, and even basic study skills and reading, writing, and speaking. The higher the proportion of part-time students, the thinner the resource staff and materials must be spread; there is even greater need for multiple copies of materials and more circulating audiovisual equipment, since many of those students are on campus only once or twice a week and want to be able to take resources home for study purposes.<sup>9</sup>

—Open admissions policies in many schools have posed the problem of the "illiterate" student. It has been said that in community colleges with an open door policy the reading range of the students varies from fourth grade to a senior in college.

Therefore, a significant proportion of the students in the typical community college with an open door policy cannot read or comprehend the books found in a typical collegiate undergraduate library. Unfortunately, they are not interested either, because they have developed an antipathy toward books. Many of the vocational-technical students are primarily nonverbally oriented and are not the typical book learners. How can we proceed in developing a learning resource center if 50 percent of the students cannot read the books on the shelves? We must stimulate the acquisition and/or development of alternate instructional materials. The LRC must become a complete partner in the challenge of *admitting* all and then *educating* all, regardless of the socio/economic or the culturally disadvantaged background of the student."<sup>10</sup>

4. There is an increasing pressure to use technology to solve our problems—technology which itself is expensive—while at the same time there is a pressure to reduce costs. LRC users and supporters have increased ex-

expectations for what an LRC should be able to provide its users. If the airlines and banks can provide immediate access to information, why cannot we? If satellites can transmit information vast distances at low cost, why cannot community colleges and their learning resource centers? If photocopies can so easily be made, why are there delays in getting materials? Our users are influenced in their expectations by the rest of their experiences with the society in which they live.

5. As the technology available to, and being forced upon LRC's changes, there will be the need to reallocate resources, retrain, and update staff on a continuous basis. As funding becomes tighter we will see a higher proportion of tenured faculty who will also need retraining and assistance in adapting to changing environments and newer technologies.
6. There is an expectation on the part of employees for increased job satisfaction. A generation ago, and perhaps even more recently than that, it was simply enough to have a job. In the past, you didn't have to enjoy your job. The concept of really enjoying what you do for a living is relatively new. But it does place additional demands on the employer, and that is what many of us are.
7. As the job market tightens, we can expect to have a greater emphasis on collective bargaining, particularly in its most negative forms of trying to maintain the status quo in a changing environment.
8. There will be increased pressures for cost/effectiveness and accountability. Bartlett, in an address on the future of higher education said,

Accountability to whom? And for what? Accountability has often been a euphemism for an argument among accountants. Occasionally, it has been simply a way of saying that you should not have the degree of autonomy that you have. But accountability is, in a fundamental way, something we all should accept.

... Ultimately, accountability is a matter of being responsible for students' education. That is to say, accountability finally must be measured by results as well as by procedures. One can easily imagine an absolutely perfect procedure, in which everybody is accounted for in the least detail—the net result of which is nevertheless to produce nothing. So, surely our problem is to get people thinking about accountability in terms of results as well as the more primitive notion of simple procedures.<sup>11</sup>

9. Tax reform initiatives will decrease the size of the pie from which our slice of money comes.
10. State-wide coordination bodies will become more controlling and less coordinating. Public agencies feel inclined to step in and help us with some of the problems in higher education.

This 'stepping in' takes the form of state coordinating agencies and of Federal relations. While we may not readily feel so, the intent is usually benign. But clearly, it is not very wise for us to look at this trend as a simple act of malevolence. The impact on us is so great that one of our real problems in the next decade will be how to repel some of these intrusions, how to channel them, how to reinter-

pret ourselves to public authorities so that, for whatever reason, the encroachment of public agencies does not seriously hamper or hobble our enterprise.<sup>12</sup>

11. And, finally, in this litany of realities are the increasing, and sometimes conflicting, government regulations which we must meet. We see this already in OSHA requirements, affirmative action/equal opportunity employment requirements, minimum wage regulations, and copyright legislation. We are now required to keep more records, better documentation, advertise more widely, fire more carefully, and hire fewer people. What will you do if you have to make your stacks accessible to wheelchairs? How will you handle the situation if you are committed to affirmative action programs but required at the same time to give preferential treatment to veterans? The Sears case illustrates conflicting government regulations well.<sup>13</sup>

## Strategies

What will our strategies be in this environment?

Perhaps the most critical strategy of all will be to read and understand the changing environments in which the learning resource center functions, to be adaptive to the changing environments and, MOST IMPORTANT, to articulate to our various publics, our academic deans, our administrators, our boards, our faculty and users what these changes are and why we are affected in the way we are.

We have a continual, constant selling job to perform, in order to get the resources we need to get the job done.

Since Learning Resource Centers will be competing with other parts of the institution for the dollars that will be available, we must continue to develop services that are valued by the students, faculty, and administration. These will include instructional development programs with learning packages as the end result, remedial programs, counselling, community service activities. These are the kinds of activities that LRC's have built their reputations in, and will continue to do so. At the same time we will need to evaluate periodically what are the services we should be providing, what new services or programs do we need to add, what activities should we drop. Managing an LRC is not unlike managing some other businesses, particularly in what Peter Drucker calls "the third sector"—the not-for-profit organizations. We should not fall into the trap of "love of product," the phrase marketing people use for those who are so committed to a product or service that they refuse to give up it up and make way for something new, even when it is not longer of much use to the consumer or student, or faculty member.

Since we are non-profit service organizations, we do not have the simple measure of performance that our business colleagues have—and by that I mean sales and profits in hard figures, dollars. It is therefore more difficult for us to measure the value of an activity we offer.

In a world that is no longer expanding at the rate it had previously, we will need constantly to reevaluate our programs, cutting programs that are not of critical value so that we can add new programs that meet the changing needs of our students and our institutions.



To cite Drucker once again, he says that non-profit institutions should never start a new program without dropping an old one. And that periodically we should assess all our activities in the light of "if we were starting from scratch today what would do," and then drop the programs that we would not start if we were starting over again today.<sup>14</sup>

We must not love our present products and services so much that we cannot adapt to changing requirements.

LRC's should not be naive in viewing the rest of the organization as both colleagues and competition. The effective LRC administrator will need to develop his/her political skills to the hilt. The academic environment will never be more political. In case you need some convincing, here are some anecdotes.

—When Woodrow Wilson was running for the U.S. Presidency, he was challenged as to his political experience and qualifications. He replied that as the president of Princeton he had been in the academic world, which was the most political world of all.

—Or listen to Bill Axford: "Higher education has often been described as the peaceful groves of academe, particularly by those with an incurable sense of romanticism but, when someone suggests pruning some of the old trees in order for new shoots to grow, it can be as Professor Charles S. Steinberg so eloquently put it in a recent piece in the *N. Y. Times*. . . A jungle more terrifying than the real jungle, where predators kill out of a natural need for food . . . instead of being motivated by ' . . . an instinct for the jugular that is driven by a deadly combination of ruthless ambition and sheer malevolent sadistic pleasure' ".<sup>15</sup>

—And if that is not enough to persuade you, consider the experience of the famous scholar and diplomat Wilhelm von Humboldt. Early in the 19th century, the Prussian government commissioned Von Humboldt to found the University of Berlin. However, he resigned his position at the University only a few weeks after classes had opened, complaining that faculty constitute "The most unruly and least easily satisfied class of human beings—with their eternally conflicting interests, their jealousy, their lust for power, their one-sided views, in which each one believes that his discipline alone deserves support and advancement." In fact, he confided to his wife, being the rector of the university is "worse than trying to manage a troupe of comedians."<sup>16</sup>

## **Establishing A Good Relationship With Your Public**

Now perhaps the community college isn't *that bad*. But it is a world of real people, each with his or her own territory. It behooves the LRC staff, and its director, to keep that uppermost in mind. Be watchful, helpful, supportive of all your publics at all times. You never know when you are going to need their support.

The importance of good relations with the people with whom you come in contact cannot be over-estimated. Let's consider some of them.

Of the LRC director, Dwight Burlingame wrote in a recent book:

Nothing can take the place of a knowledgeable and emotionally stable LRC director who approaches institutional superiors with tact, confidence, and preparation. The director should be knowledgeable

not only about funding for the LRC but also about the financial status and budgeting procedures for the entire institution. If there is a likelihood that funds become available because of cutbacks elsewhere, the director should be intuitive enough to know what to do. Likewise if unexpected funds become available . . . have your strategy for how you would spend the money and the rationale. . . . the alert director sees state, federal, and private funds as additional revenue and knows that it is available.<sup>17</sup>

In a study of learning resource centers Sarah Thomson reported that administrators spoke of the importance of healthy relationships with the college administration and of having administrators understand the needs of libraries and learning resources. Several attitudinal guidelines were stressed:

- (a) the need to present the programs fairly and clearly in terms of their educational effect.
- (b) the importance of tact and humor, and the desirability of being low-key, but not a "yes person."<sup>18</sup>

In her book *Learning Resource Centers in Community Colleges* she devotes a whole chapter to the subject of "Faculty, Student, and Learning, and Learning Resource Staff Interrelationships." (p. 76-85) Remember other important relationships, such as with the Business Manager, and the Plant Maintenance Manager.

Two media directors volunteered the opinion that the reason the media program was so much better supported by the faculty than the library program was that "library staff don't get out of the library enough. They should go out and sell more, not wait for the people to come to them."<sup>19</sup>

Have staff serve as actively as possible on faculty senates, faculty associations and clubs, and faculty committees of all kinds, but especially on curriculum committees. The administrators stressed the importance of staff members being articulate participants, concerned and knowledgeable about the instructional problems of their colleagues. Other responses to our realities:

—One of the chief functions of a learning resources director is that of continuing to educate the chief administrator, and others, of the LRC's needs, functions, and capabilities, as well as feeding them information on relevant trends in their own fields. The LRC director or librarian is in the best position to make the institution aware of trends on the horizon, acting as a true information center.

—We will need to give an increased emphasis to the production of activities and materials to help our student body succeed in school.

—We will need to provide longer hours of service so that part-time students with daytime responsibilities can have equal access to the LRC.

—We may need to make arrangements for our students to use specific public library facilities or other spaces, to bring programs and resources closer to the students.

—Our centers should be physically inviting spaces.

—We may need to provide more community services to obtain and maintain community commitment to the community college concept.

—LRC can provide information + subject experts (faculty).

## Finally . . .

At a recent presentation on what the successful business corporation will be doing in the 1980's, the imperatives faced sound not dissimilar from your own:<sup>20</sup> When the term LRC is substituted in the appropriate places you will see that we share common requirements with business.

1. A successful LRC will periodically subject itself to an appraisal of its objectives and programs which will challenge and may even refute its own goals and ambitions.
2. A successful LRC will use a STRATEGY to effect change, and not as a means of sustaining past or present accomplishments.
3. A successful LRC will view government as a proliferating fact of life, but nonetheless, one that can be influenced and even turned to an advantage.
4. A successful LRC will consider any program or activity disposable and as a result will seek to avoid investment in assets for which there is neither a market nor an alternative use.
5. A successful LRC will regularly re-examine, and restructure if necessary, its organization both to reflect new program directions and to route out bureaucratic inertia.
6. A successful LRC will never lose sight of the fact that its vitality and its prospects hinge on the quality of its management talent, its staff, and on the commitment which has been instilled in that talent.
7. A successful LRC will recognize the extraordinary value of effective time management, and the contamination which can result from slovenly practices of a few key staff members.
8. A successful LRC will be prepared at all times to implement a contingency plan which can eliminate a major increment of expense before it is useless or impossible to do so.

Indeed, this is a set of imperatives that have important applicability to us.

The LRC does not exist in a vacuum but is shaped by the goals and objectives of the institution of which it is a part and also by outside forces and developments affecting education, librarianship, and instructional technology. We must assist the institution in keeping its ear to the ground, adapting to changes in the environment, and in articulating our problems and value to all those who influence directly or indirectly, our ability to get our objectives accomplished. These then are the strategies that lie ahead of us for dealing with our set of political realities.

**Julie Carroll Virgo, Executive Secretary, ACRL/ALA, presented this paper at the 14th Annual Community College Learning Resources Conference, Charlotte, N. C., on March 27, 1979.**

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