

From the President

Pauletta Brown Bracy, President

Productive Engagement: Perceiving and Improving the Library Profession and Image

In the context of a conversation with a friend, who works in the corporate arena, he casually inquired, “Why do we need libraries, anyway?” I was stunned because I expected the professional courtesy of proper respect! In recovery, I patiently responded in an exultation of our profession that librarians and libraries are indispensable fundamentals of the social and intellectual landscapes. He affirmed with a meekly uttered, “Okay.” He needed to know why it was more convenient to visit a library rather than the Internet. I needed to know how he could have formed such a disposition. So I sought perceptions of the library profession among North Carolinians.

Graduate students in my classes offered to assist in the data collection of a simple word-association exercise. I provided the prompt and the words. Directions were to ask for a word or a few words: “When you hear the following word, what word(s) come(s) to mind?” Respondents were to react to the following words: *Library*, *Librarian*, *Library Media Specialist*, *Information*, and *Access*. I also asked for information on respondents’ occupation, gender, age, and library usage pattern. Fifteen students interviewed 106 citizens roughly selected at random.

A slight minority of the respondents indicated that they did not use the library. Their occupations varied, from the arts, business, education, homemaking, and law, to medicine, religion, retail sales, real estate, and social work, and, as a sign of the times, the unemployed. Ages ranged from 9 to 93 years old. Most were in their twenties with fairly even distribution among the ‘tweens and teens, and those in their thirties and fifties, although the forties, sixties, eighties, and nineties were also represented. Respondents were 50/50 male/female.

The word *Library* summoned a place of information, books, and magazines, with *Book(s)* being the overwhelming association. Other significant words were *Information*, *Knowledge*, *Reading*, *Research*, *Study(ing)*, and *Quiet*. *Boring* was reported twice by individuals who coincidentally were not library users.

The majority of responses to the word *Librarian* spoke to resourcefulness with *Helpful* being the preferred word, with *Books*, *Cool*, *Educated*, *Friend(ly)*, *Knowledgeable*, *Organized*, *Smart*, *Teacher*, and *Woman* also offered. A distressing professional image emerged with responses such as *Control*, *Glasses*, *Invert*, *Mean*, *Old Lady*, *Nerd*, *Quiet*, and *Shhhh!* In the matter of *Library Media Specialist*, the most prominent responses were *Teacher*, *Computers*, *Helpful*, *School*, *Smart* were the most popular responses with *Technology*, *Technical Specialist*, *Underling*, and *Videos* also offered. Some perceived the *Library Media Specialist* as a younger librarian and slightly less prim/proper than the word *Librarian*.

The word *Information* stimulated visions of *Computers* at a considerably greater rate than *Books*, [the] *Internet*, and *Knowledge*, the subsequent most recurrent responses, along with *Data*, *Encyclopedia*, *Facts*, *Questions*, and *Research*. The most repeated words associated with *Access* were *Computer(s)* and *Internet*, with others being *Availability*, *Ease/Easy*, *Free*, *Granted*, *Key*, *Knowledge*, *Online*, *Open*, *Password*, and *Permission*.

In conclusion, libraries are for the most part favorably regarded and when individuals think of information and access, certain aspects of the library profession come to mind. Even the unflattering perceptions of libraries and librarians can be changed by a *productively engaged* campaign to reinforce the positive image of the profession. In one particular response to the word *Access*, one of the respondents stated, “Easier with a librarian.” I could not have said it better.