

Faculty and administrators are challenged to prepare their students better for a more meaningful contribution to civic life

Reconnecting Library Education and the Mission of Community

By Kathleen de la Peña McCook

UNIVERSITIES THROUGHOUT the United States are turning their attention to the ideals of developing and using knowledge for the improvement of society. There has been great concern among academe's various stakeholders that universities currently view students as customers, market themselves as databanks for distance learning, and allocate resources toward their most profitable uses as they slight other institutional values. Issues quite similar to these caused the American Library Association

(ALA) to call for a review of professional education at the Congress on Professional Education in 1999. These trends were explored at the institutional level in the 1998 Wingspread Declaration, "Renewing the Civic Mission of the American Research University," which challenged universities to forge a robust sense that their work contributes to the commonwealth of communities, the nation, and the world (www.compact.org/news/Wingspread.html). A return to a civic mission will mean involving students in projects of relevance that will prepare them for engaged citizenship.

Those who educate for the professions—such as library and information science faculty—are viewed as having been particularly remiss in developing an ethos among students that practicing their

chosen occupation can make a significant contribution to civic life. Lacking a sense of community service, the professions no longer seek legitimacy by stressing the social importance of the knowledge they possess but rather the expert knowledge and skills they provide in the market.

Expertise becomes a neutral skill to be appropriated by successful competitors (William M. Sullivan, "Institutional Identity and Social Responsibility in Higher Education," *Civic Responsibility and Higher Education*, American Council on Education, 2000, p. 25–26). Paradoxically librarianship as a practice has been at the forefront of providing service to enhance the general welfare, but librarianship as it is being taught has focused more in recent years on technological solutions to information problems without the ideal of engaged service as a central theme.

Renewed covenant, national solutions

"If this nation is to succeed in a new century, the covenant between our

institutions and the public they serve must be renewed again and made binding" (Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities, *Renewing the Covenant: Learning, Discovery, and Engagement in a New Age and Different World*, March 2000).

The Kellogg Commission calls for a redesign of universities so they become more productively involved with communities. A number of efforts to refocus on civic responsibility and social justice in U.S. universities have appeared in the last few years, and this number is growing.

Most notable is the Campus Compact (founded in 1985), a coalition of college and university presidents committed to helping students develop the values and skills of citizenship through participation in public and community service. The Campus Compact has received a \$3 million grant from the Pew Charitable Trust to increase student participation in civic and community life. A special focus of the grant is to deepen the practice of "service-learning" within a range of academic disciplines.

Service learning is viewed as a critical strategy in the redirection of U.S. higher education. It joins two complex concepts—community action (service) and efforts to learn from that action and connect what is learned to existing knowledge (learning). Unlike volunteer service, with service learning there is reciprocity between the community and the learner.

Scholarship of engagement

Ernest L. Boyer identified "The Scholarship of Engagement" in an address before the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, noting that universities must become more vigorous partners in the search for answers to our most pressing social, civic, economic, and moral problems. Disciplines as taught must develop an attitude of engagement and be committed to the improvement of the real communities in which those who teach and those who learn live. Indeed, the Kellogg Commission goes further, "arguing for transforming the traditional emphasis of universities on service into active engagement, more interdisciplinary scholarship, and calling for greater faculty involvement in surrounding communities."

These discussions are taking place at a time when there is a national movement of many organizations and individuals to develop community capacity—a movement that should include

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public librarians as key participants. If new LIS graduates are not prepared during their education to understand and participate in community-building initiatives, then the connection of libraries to such initiatives would be difficult.

LIS models for service learning

Librarianship as a practice encompasses the scope and the sweep of many social movements—so many, perhaps, that the profession focuses on action and not on linkage. Librarians must be involved in community-building initiatives so that our work is seen as vital to the growing national agenda for civic involvement. This is important because the work we do can be essential in helping communities gain resiliency.

A commitment to the ideals of civic engagement must begin during library school students' first educational experiences. Some educators of librarians *are* involved in service learning and the scholarship of engagement, but this involvement has not been connected to the national discussion now taking place. The work of librarians is characteristically broad and systemic while at the same time personal and intimate.

It is our work that may well provide some of the human connections called for by Robert Putnam (*Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, S. & S., 2000), who asks how we can renew American civic engagement and social connectedness in the 21st century.

Four models for learning

Identifying examples

of service learning in programs of library and information science education will help us to see that engagement can become a central aspect of our teaching. The four service learning models presented here can lead the way for further chronicling of the involvement of LIS programs in the scholarship of engagement and for other programs to identify meaningful ways to contribute to the communities in which they live.

- Under the guidance of professor Lorraine Roy, an enrolled member of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, Pembina Band, White Earth Reservation, students at the University of Texas at Austin Graduate School of Library and Information Science combine service learning to work with 4Direc-

tions. The project integrates Native American culture and technology enabling students to maintain and learn their heritage while taking advantage of the future. The 4Directions consortia helps Native schools form a community of learners who use technology to assist each other, communicate, and share in the diversity of cultures ensuring that the voices of Native peoples are heard in the emerging Information Age. Roy and her students have worked with 4Directions to create a National Virtual Museum of the American Indian. (4direction.org)

- The Jail Library Student Group (JLSG) at the School of Library and Information Studies (SLIS), University of Wisconsin-Madison, was one of 21 student organizations out of 3000 to receive a President's Service Award in Washington, DC, in 1999. The JLSG provides recreational, educational, and resource reading for inmates at two Madison jails and oversees Kids Connection, which helps inmates who are parents tape-record bedtime stories for their children. Under the



A University of Texas GSLIS student helps Native American children as part of the 4Directions program

guidance of SLIS Director Louise Robbins, students have developed interdisciplinary and community connections with the Sheriff's Department, Dane County Public Library Outreach Department, State Library, and the UW Criminal Justice Department (slisweb.lis.wisc.edu/~jail).

- Library services for migrant and seasonal farm workers are the special focus of the students of Associate Professor Marilyn Stauffer at the School of Library and Information Science, University of South Florida, Tampa. Students work with librarians serving farm workers to develop resources that meet health and immigration information needs. They also participate in story times for migrant children.

The course has connected students to community groups such as the Rural Social Services partnership, Beth-El Mission, and the Redlands Christian Migrant Association as well as to other faculty at the university in the college of education who work with farm worker communities (www.cas.usf.edu/lis/migrant/syllabus2000.html).

- Associate Professor Paul Resnick at the School of Information at the University of Michigan coordinates the Community Information Corps (CIC), through which students learn to deal with the complex issues of community building in the emerging "new economy." CIC members are an interdisciplinary group of information professionals who learn, share, and apply new techniques in the service of public goals (www.si.umich.edu/cic).

These examples of service learning in schools accredited by ALA provide models for the movement of LIS education toward engaged scholarship. ALA President Nancy Kranich plans to foster service learning by proposing an initiative with the National Communications Association that would enlist students to work with librarians in training community residents to use information resources that can help them become information literate.

A return to community

The year 2000 has seen efforts to reexamine the direction of society: the Dialogue 2000 initiative to identify solutions to poverty-related problems sponsored by the National Association of Community Action Agencies, and the Call to Renewal, spearheaded by *Sojourners* editor Jim Wallis, which includes moral imperatives on which to judge political candidates and calls on all segments of society to provide resources to strengthen families, provide safe neighborhoods, and renew our country's commitment to racial justice.

These movements are the backdrop against which university officials and faculty across the academy are reviewing their mission and goals. The rededication of the commitment to civic responsibility in research universities in a spirit of engaged scholarship is emerging as the next great idea that will slowly become the standard in the United States. The aforementioned LIS schools demonstrate that service learning offers the opportunity for a reconnection of library expertise with a commitment to public service and community building. ■