Asian-American Library Administrators: Experiences and Perspectives

Editorial Note: "Asian-American Library Administrators: Experiences and Perspectives" was the central theme for discussion at the 1979 Annual Conference of the Chinese American Library Association held on June 26 in Dallas, Texas. The meeting was chaired by John Yung-hsiang Lai, Associate Librarian, Harvard-Yenching Library. The Journal is pleased to published two papers presented at the meeting in this issue.

Library Management in Transition: What Are Your Responsibilities?

Ching-chih Chen*

"Library management" is a topic very close to my heart. It is a broad area of study encompassing a wide range of problems, issues, and concerns.

Before coming to the heart of this subject, several of my personal stands on the topic need to be specifically stated:

—With due respect to all managers, I do not consider "management" the domain of only those who hold administrative positions.

—I interpret "management" in its broadest sense. I consider every professional in an organization a manager in his or her own right. The only distinction among these professionals is the level and complexity of their managerial involvements.

—Given the differences in ethnic, cultural, social, political, sexual, and other backgrounds among various groups, I feel that management theory and technique should be applicable to all groups and backgrounds.

For years library managers have managed to supervise their

*Dr. Chen is Professor and Associate Dean, Graduate School of Library and Information Science, Simmons College, Boston, Massachusetts.
staff, prepare and expend their budget, and run their organiza-
tions mainly on experience, intuition, common sense, and the
like. They benefited from, and took advantage of, the privileged
assumption that libraries were necessities and were subject to little
challenge in terms of accountability, and justification for existence.

Since the early 1970s, there has been massive financial pres-
sure on libraries due partially to serious economic cut-backs and
rising costs, and partially to numerous other new developments,
such as the rapid advent of new technology and its application in
the information fields, and the exponential growth of both printed
and non-printed materials (or the information explosion).

Machlup and Leeson, in their three-volume scholarly work,
stated that in 1976, there was a total of 8,414 periodical titles\(^1\)
published in the United States alone, and there is at least a 2
percent growth as found by Fry and White.\(^2\) Publishing has, in
recent years, accounted for some 0.2 percent of the GNP. In
1976, net sales reached almost 4.2 billion dollars.\(^3\)

On the other hand, library material prices have escalated at
an alarming rate. Dick DeGennaro provided some fine examples
in his well-cited article,\(^4\) showing that some journals have
increased their subscription costs as much as 800 percent in a 5-year
period (1970-1975), and that the overall average price increase
during the period was 92 percent in comparison with the U.S.
Consumer Price Index increase of 38.6 percent. Further increase
of journal prices was projected in a recent NCLIS report.\(^5\) The
average price per journal title was $35.00 in 1977. It is projected
to be $64.49 in 1982. Similarly, the rate of increase in library
costs far exceeds the rate of inflation in the U.S. Yet, it is no
secret that a substantial number of libraries have not been able to
obtain operating budget increases sufficient to even cover infla-
tion. In many places, such as the Countway Library of Medicine at
Harvard University, the library’s annual budget was subjected to
severe cuts in the early 1970s.\(^6\) The annual library expenditures
for 1969 were $968,269 and were reduced to $753,625 in 1973.
In light of inflation and higher rates of increase of material costs,
a 25 percent actual dollar cut translates into a 60 percent or
higher cut for the actual library costs.

This kind of withering economic pressure on libraries has
forced all types of libraries into cutting staff and purchases of library materials, opening shorter hours, and desperately seeking other possible avenues of income. The measures taken by libraries vary in degree of seriousness. For example, one of the more serious staff cuts took place at the Buffalo and Erie County Library. As reported in LJ, in early 1977, the library lost 42.1 percent of its work force, including 64 professional librarians, 63 clerks, and 62 blue-collar workers.

Another recent issue of LJ reported that because of Proposition 13, the San Francisco Public Library expects to lose at least $713,000 in operating revenue, and receive about 88 percent of last year's budget. The library director spelled out his means of absorbing the funding losses:

—reducing hours of service at the main library from 66 to 52 hours a week
—closing the business branch
—cutting hours at all branches
—shutting down five to six branch libraries
—limiting the book budget to 88 percent of last year's level.

A recent Book Industry Study Group projected that library acquisitions will cost libraries substantially more in all types of materials, while the number of items purchased with these increased budgets will be substantially less than before. For example, the dollar expenditure for projected library periodicals will increase 60 percent from 1973/74 to 1980/81, while in effect the units of periodicals purchased will decrease 25 percent. A recent Arthur D. Little report projected that in one year (1976 to 1977) libraries of all types had a stated percentage decrease in number of units purchased: 6 percent decrease for academic libraries. 4.4 percent for public libraries, 1.7 percent for special libraries, and 12.2 percent for school libraries. In short, libraries have been spending more to buy less, and will continue to do so.

These illustrations demonstrate clearly that the economic thumbscrews have tightened on the already pained, traditionally under-financed libraries. In this kind of contemporary environment, libraries have gone through a difficult transition—from their past favored position to the shaky and vulnerable one of today. Confronted by the erosion of their purchasing power,
and the rising cost of library operations and materials, librarians have learned to "fight back." They commonly adopt numerous cost-reduction measures for survival purposes.

Machlup and Lesson\textsuperscript{10} surveyed 154 libraries regarding the most effective cost-reduction methods in use. In the 127 libraries which responded, the top three methods were:

1. dropping subscriptions to periodicals
2. reallocating budget to periodicals at the expense of books
3. adding fewer new subscriptions to periodicals

Other methods included:

1. strict justification of several subscriptions
2. restriction of purchases of selected books
3. elimination of staff positions
4. solicitation of gift subscriptions
5. more judicious book selection
6. limited book-acquisition budget
7. closed undergraduate library
8. cooperative subscriptions with other libraries

Librarians have painfully learned to divert themselves from the traditional concepts as "journals are the sacred cows of libraries." With the help of new technology, they have sought to reduce the traditionally high labor-intensive library operational cost through the use of the OCLC shared cataloging system and the like, and available on-line bibliographical data bases.

Realizing that no library can afford to have everything, librarians have organized formal and informal resource-sharing activities. These include the setting up of various networks, the flourishing of various kinds of consortia, and the proposal of the National Periodical Center. Such activities vary in scope and structure, from the hierarchical National Biomedical Communication network to the proposed hourglass-shaped system for the National Periodical Center,\textsuperscript{11} and from large national and regional networks to small, local, informal ones. They all share a common goal—to provide an efficient mechanism for comprehensive, rapid, and widespread information transfer at reasonable cost.

While these are all positive cost reduction ventures, they are still not enough. How many journal subscriptions can we cut? How restricted can we be in terms of book purchase? How many
staff positions can we eliminate? How many gift volumes and dollars can we solicit? The trimming and cutting of fat is not difficult, but what is trimmed and cut when we hit real meat and bone? Have we ever raised such basic questions as:

- Do we know why we are under-financed?
- How do we account for our performance?
- Is the library considered an essential part of an organization.
- If so, why is the library not supported properly. And if not, why not?
- What are our goals and objectives?
- What would be viable ways to seek the most cost-beneficial and cost-effective alternatives?
- What criteria should be used to limit new subscriptions and cancel old ones?
- Will cost reduction measures, such as buying fewer library materials, provide an ultimate solution.
- Will resource networking and sharing solve our basic problem?

Despite the desperate economic situation, most libraries have not seriously addressed themselves to these questions and, thus, lack adequate answers.

The above mentioned cost-reduction methods for survival purposes are certainly sensible ones, but they cannot solve the basic problems which libraries are facing. They are what I call "passive" methods. There is a bottom line in terms of cutting staff positions, cutting library hours, and restricting library collection development.

Following the preceding discussion, we should then address the question, "What are our responsibilities during this transitional period?"

For those of us in library education, it is our responsibility to make sure that learning opportunities, both formal and informal, can be provided continuously to meet the professionals' needs. Many of the continuing education programs at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science, Simmons College, address precisely these needs. Our successful five-day nation-wide Institute on Library Management without Bias sponsored by the
U.S. Office of Education Title II-B Training Grant is an obvious and recent example of this.\textsuperscript{12}

For library organizations, professional associations, and funding agencies, it is their responsibility to provide support in a forum for interchange and mutual learning in the important areas mentioned earlier.

For those of us who are practicing professionals, what are our responsibilities?

The Need to Be a Better Manager

In coping with a shrinking budget, cutting resources is not enough. We need to be able to maximize our limited resources. Since, in the management area, most library schools did not, until recently, prepare us well as managers, we must find ways, through both formal and informal continuing education opportunities, to gain this competency and self-confidence. It is our responsibility to constantly investigate and learn more about new management theories and techniques, and to make every attempt to aggressively use this expertise to solve our problems in a problem-oriented way.

We need to do the following:

\begin{itemize}
  \item understand the basic management theories such as leadership theories, and their application to library operations;
  \item understand the group dynamics in an organization;
  \item promote effective staffing and staff development in personnel administration;
  \item improve interrelationships between various internal measurement systems and overall library management planning and decision making;
  \item develop interpersonal skills and leadership styles necessary for more effective management;
  \item be aware of the organization’s communication channels and the effectiveness of their use in the management process;
  \item aggressively promote the library and its services through public relations;
  \item utilize financial management techniques;
  \item adopt powerful quantitative analytical techniques to assist in the decision-making process.
\end{itemize}
All of these management techniques—whether human resources management, financial management, or scientific management—have been utilized widely for a long time in non-library environments, particularly in profit-making organizations, in order to enhance productivity, effectiveness, efficiency, job performance, probability of success, and positive return rate. In other words, they have been used to accomplish the maximization of resources in terms of benefits. Thus, the usefulness of these techniques and theories to librarians at this time is self-evident.

It should be stressed that these management techniques are necessary for every library person whether head librarian, department head, or functional librarian. Each is a manager in his or her own right. The only difference among librarians is in the level and the complexity of the managerial involvement.

New Perspective and New Information Role of the Library

It is necessary to realize that management theories and techniques alone cannot solve our current library problems. We must apply these techniques in the right context. To do so, we need to understand our environment—political, social, economic, etc.—and to have a thorough and fundamental self-evaluation of the new perspective and role of library in an electronic society. In other words, the library is here for what, for whom, why, and how?

Arthur D. Little, Inc. in its study report with the catchy title, *Passing the Threshold into the Information Age*, identifies three information transfer eras — discipline-oriented, mission-oriented, and problem-oriented.13

Era I. Discipline-Oriented

Basic Value System: “Knowledge for knowledge’s sake.”

It was dominant through World War II and remains significant today. The information of Era I is primarily disseminated through books, journals, and professional meetings. Libraries play a vital part in this era by providing information essentially free to the end user.

Era II. Mission-Oriented

Basic Value System: “Organize to do a job.”

In this era, 1950s to mid-1960s, service agencies of Era I, such as libraries, were used, but additional information
sources were tapped heavily. The latter category includes many commercial firms and systems specifically in the information repackaging area. For example, during this era, over 3,000 indexing and abstracting services were developed.

Era III. Problem-Oriented

Basic Value System: “Solving society’s problems.”

This era started in the late 1960s as complex issues began to surface. During this third era, information which is required to cope with these problems is interdisciplinary. Producers and users of information are quite far apart; thus, expert intermediaries are essential in order to have an efficient flow of information. Technology is heavily utilized and on-line services are common in this era.

The major Era III problem categories listed in the ADL report are:

1. Environment
   - Air, Water, Solid
   - Hazardous Materials
   - Noise
2. Energy
3. Economic Well-Being
4. Safety
   - Hazardous Chemicals
   - Occupational Safety
   - Home Safety
   - Auto Safety
   - Mine Safety
   - Disaster Prevention
   - Others
5. Public Health
   - Drugs
   - Pesticides
   - Health Care
6. Transportation
   - Energy Impacts; Mass Transport
7. Crime Prevention; Administration of Justice
8. Housing
9. Welfare
Several studies of citizens' information needs have also found that a great majority of situations which give rise to the individual's need for information have been problem-oriented. For example, the study on *Citizen Information Seeking Patterns* by Chen et al. showed that the ten most frequently mentioned situations in which citizens in New England sought information were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consumer Issues</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job-related: Technical</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job-related: Getting/Changing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobs</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing and Household</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintenance</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education and Schooling</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money Matters</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreation</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job-related: Organizational</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relations</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job-related: Salary and</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These are all problem-oriented situations. As managers in the information business, we should ask ourselves about the implications of the findings of these studies. We must ask ourselves if the libraries of today are still playing the same role within the same concepts, value systems, and purposes? Can libraries continue to provide their information services on traditional paths? What is the role of the library vis-à-vis other aggressive information providers, such as government agencies, TV, and radio? As the ADL report stated,

Today, when TV electronic media represent most information transfer, when literacy is nearly universal (although it may not be practiced), when mass market paperback books are in every corner store and represent about 15 minutes' wages of a worker, when a library can hold only a small fraction of the world's knowledge, one wonders just what the role of a public library is. Typically, only 35 percent of the individuals in a community today have library cards, and one-third has never used a library; 37 percent have no idea of how libraries are funded.

Several recent studies of citizens' information needs, such
as the Seattle one, suggest that only 3 percent of these needs are met by libraries.\textsuperscript{17} More recently, an *Information Needs of Californians* study\textsuperscript{18} showed that the library has been rated in the very lowest category in terms of fulfilling Californians' information needs. It is far lower on the scale than TV, magazines, radio, or books, and is considered in the same category as religious leaders, charity, or social services. The recent New England study by Chen, *et al.*, shows that for only 3 percent of all the situations cited, the library is considered to be the most important source of information, and the library is consulted as one of the sources in only 17 percent of the situations.\textsuperscript{19}

Over the years, librarians have done a great deal of good work. Nevertheless, it is essential that we understand where we are in relation to all the other providers of information. Technology has dramatically changed our environment, our life style, and our mode of information utilization. We have already noted that media such as TV have taken over many of the information transfer functions which traditionally belonged to libraries. New technologies, such as computers, micrographics, cable TV, and video technology are playing an increasingly important role in the whole information transfer process.

The Vice President of IBM, Dr. Lewis M. Branscomb, delivered a thought-provoking speech entitled "Information: The Ultimate Frontier."\textsuperscript{20} He said that the technology exists to store the entire 18.5 million volumes of books and pamphlets in the Library of Congress in fewer than 20 IBM-3850s. He predicted that the same investment that today would hold 20 million books in computer storage, would finance 15 billion electronic libraries in 100 years. Similarly, videodisc technology has a tremendous potential for information storage and dissemination. Its low cost and high storage potential capability will make possible the creation of complete, relatively inexpensive libraries.\textsuperscript{21} Similar thoughts were expressed by Mitre Corporation's Vice President, Herbert D. Benington, in his address at the White House Conference on Library and Information Services.\textsuperscript{22} With these types of new technological applications and developments, what should be the new perspectives and roles of librarians as information intermediates or brokers?
We are in a fluid period when change occurs with ever-growing frequency. A progressive library manager must be in harmony with progress; up-to-date with new knowledge, theories, techniques, and practices; critical of both the old and the new; and able and willing to accept new changes with vision, foresight, and new perspectives. I hope that all of us will be in the main stream of this exciting development, for only this type of library manager can achieve true, bias-free library management.

Footnotes


17. Dervin, *Development*.

18. *Information Needs of Californians*.


