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Random Ramblings — The Bill and Melinda Gates University Library

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Newsflash! **Bill Gates** has announced that he will found a new university near the **Microsoft Redmond** campus. In making the announcement, he recalled another rich magnate's success in establishing a major institution of higher learning. "If **Leland Stanford** can do it, so can I." Rumors are circulating that **Gates'** agents are recruiting the best faculty from around the world to give the institution instant credibility as a premier research and teaching university. Plans are already underway to start construction of the needed classroom, laboratories, and support facilities. **Gates**, drawing upon his experience in providing computer to libraries, told the reporters that one of the easiest parts will be to create an instant research library. In a conscious paraphrase of one of pop star's **Billy Joel's** songs, he added: "All you need is a whole lot of money."

While the paragraph above is fiction, at least for now, being able to create an "instant" research library is close to reality. In this column, I'll pretend that I'm the new director of the **Gates Library**.

I was quite surprised that **Mr. Gates** hired me to establish the **Gates Library** for his new university. Among other goals, he told me to create an opening day collection and gave me what amounted to a blank check. The following is a summary of the plan submitted for his approval.

The obvious first step will be to seek out packages of digital resources of all types — databases, electronic serial subscriptions, data files, eBooks, and whatever else is available. Since I'm a frugal person even with the availability of quasi-unlimited funding, I will do my best to avoid overlap to avoid paying more than once for the same content. I know from experience that I will not completely succeed at this impossible task since my former library had ten ways to access the electronic *Library Journal*. I will also bring together focus groups of faculty and students to test which available interface works best and try to standardize as much as possible on the selected version. Perhaps I can even get the **Microsoft** programmers to write some nifty software to blend the varying interfaces into the selected one since this step will simplify searching and assure more consistent results.

My second stop will be to buy as complete access as possible to the resources created by the **Google Books Project**. I don't think that **Google** can refuse to sell access without getting into trouble with federal anti-monopoly laws. Furthermore, **Microsoft** and **Google** do share some common interests. I will also do my best to make sure that **Google** makes recently digitized items available as quickly as possible. A final and risky strategy will be to see if I can get **Microsoft's** backing to

encourage **Google** to negotiate with libraries that hold collections of particular importance for the **Gates University**.

To fill holes in areas with strong digital collections and to find materials for any areas not covered by the steps above, I will also turn to the out-of-print book market. Since **Alibris** already has procedures in place to work with libraries, I'll approach them first. (In the interest of full disclosure, I'm on their Advisory Board.) I'm not sure whether I will let **Alibris** make the selections or whether I'll hire librarians and faculty subject specialists to work on the project. I'll expect some inefficiencies and duplication, but I have a firm target date for getting the library open for use. I'll also test whether the **Google** agreement is open to competing projects by working on digitizing all these materials whether under copyright or not. If I discover that I can, I'll see about interlibrary loan and subsequent digitization for any remaining items on my want list.

While the strategies above probably take care of ordinary published materials, I still have a long way to go. The **Gates University** also needs special collections to support some research specialties, mostly in the Humanities but possibly other areas like History of Science. I could hire agents to carefully examine catalogs from the world's major rare book auction houses, but this type of acquisitions will take too much time and most likely quickly inflate the prices for rare books. I'll attack this problem in two different ways. First, I'll **Bing** (not **Google**) the appropriate search terms to find existing digital collections that will support the **Gates University**. While the library can link to these sites, I'd prefer offering incentives to the holding institutions that will allow the **Gates University Library** to download the digital contents, including any supporting infrastructure, that I will then mount on the Library's own computers. I might, however, think twice about this strategy if updating the digital holdings proves to be too cumbersome. Second, I'll see if I have enough funding to offer a round of digitization grants for subjects of particular interest to the **Gates University Library** with the provision that the **Gates Library** gets a royalty free copy of all digital creations. The grants will simplify the negotiation process since applicants will already know the terms and acknowledge that they agree to them by applying.

At some point, I'll evaluate the need for a relatively small print collection. I expect that this collection will include mostly books that get used frequently, at least once each semester, and will mainly support undergraduate teaching and research. While I'm tempted to get eBooks, I worry about the environmental harm since I've read that most students print the books anyway. As a step to make our initial

classes of students happy, I'll also subscribe to one of the digital textbook services that are becoming available — provided the costs aren't exorbitant. Luckily, that threshold is much higher at the **Gates University** than in most other academic institutions.

The steps above cover collecting for the traditional academic research library quite well and should get the library up and running quickly. But I want to do better than that. Each year, I'd like to offer a competition to identify possible innovative services in all library areas including collection development. **Gates University** faculty, students, and staff can certainly enter; but I'm toying with sponsoring an open contest. The winner might be able to have a paid internship in Redmond to work on planning the project and perhaps even stay around if implementation proves feasible. I think that we'd be able to fund this initiative generously enough to tempt a large number of the best minds in librarianship and information science to apply.

I expect that library researchers will ask for permission to visit the **Gates Library** to do research on this experiment in academic library creation. As a former library and information science professor, I intend to welcome them. For these researchers, I don't think that I'll need to offer financial support except perhaps helping them find affordable accommodations for their stays. The Gates Conference Center and Hotel might give me a good rate.

I expect their research will focus on the radical changes in academic research libraries. Before the Internet and digital initiatives, the pecking order of research institutions was mostly predetermined by their longevity. **Yale, Harvard, Columbia, Princeton** and other such libraries that had been collecting since the Colonial Period had an insurmountable lead in collection depth that an upstart university could never overcome. I've even wondered if the academic libraries that are participating fully in the **Google Books Project** have ever considered the political implications of this decision. When I was a librarian and later a professor at **Wayne State University** in Detroit, I suspected that many of our faculty lived in Ann Arbor in part to take advantage of the superior collections at the **University of Michigan** where reciprocal borrowing agreements gave them reasonably full access to the collections. With the completion of the **Google Books Project**, I'm wondering if they'll move back to Detroit to reduce their commute since they'll have virtual access to almost the same resources. On the other hand, academic reputations change slowly so that it might take a generation or two for faculty to understand the implications of the new library landscape.

To conclude, I think that the **Gates Univer-**

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590: Local Notes — The American Library Association and Professional Limits

The Case for Saying Less

by **Steve McKinzie** (Library Director, Corriher-Linn-Black Library, Catawba College, Salisbury, NC 28144; Phone: 704-637-4449) <smckinzi@catawba.edu>

The American Library Association (ALA) recently threw its weight and influence behind specific federal health reform legislation. On August 19th, the Association sent a letter to every member of Congress urging the passage of a “public option” in reference to health care legislation. The letter stated emphatically that the association ... “supports a “single-payer” option and believes [that] removing public options ... would not accomplish the strong reform needed.”¹

Of course, such pontifications by the ALA on non-library issues are nothing new. The ALA has a record of speaking out on a wide range of issues — environmental topics, gender concerns, foreign policy — even the treatment of terror suspects. Nevertheless, this habit of the ALA’s speaking out so frequently presents some real problems. Whatever may be the merits of these various views (and some of the perspectives do indeed have merit), the association takes enormous risks by such political arm twisting and maneuverings — risks that have far-reaching ramifications for the organization. By passing numerous political resolutions on non-library related questions, by heading the recommendations of the ALA’s Social Responsibilities Roundtable, and by indulging its desire for political relevance — by saying, in short, so many things about so many topics — the association squanders precious political capital. That’s right. Such actions inevitably undermine the ALA’s unique and valuable role — its voice for librarianship and its advocacy of libraries.

Everyone has had the experience of witnessing the phenomena of someone whose boldly brazen posturing does more harm than

good: the articulate faculty member who seems bent only on making his own views known, the fellow librarian who doesn’t know how to listen, but has a way of making sure everyone else hears what she thinks, or the local town gadfly ready to volunteer an opinion the minute the town-hall floor opens for debate. These folks aren’t necessarily wrong. They simply talk more than they should.

Most of us have also likely had the opposite experience — instances where you find yourself in the presence of individuals who carefully weigh their words — who speak out when the time is right and on matters close to home. People such as this have a way of winning your admiration. You instinctively respect someone who speaks rarely but speaks well. Such people gain a hearing. Sometimes they have an expertise to share. Often they have a constituency to serve.

Their voices you heed — not because you necessarily agree (often you don’t) — but because you respect their understanding and their advocacy. You recognize that they are not easily drawn into peripheral issues, that they’re not the slaves of one political ideology or another. On the contrary, they have a mission. They have a purpose.

You may not know, for instance, what **Amnesty International** thinks about global warming (for the record, they don’t have an official view on the topic) but you likely know a lot about the organization — that they care about human rights abuses — that they champion the rights of the politically oppressed, whether such people find themselves abused by the left or mistreated by the right. To be sure, the organization is political and outspoken,

but the leadership of **Amnesty International** is also unabashedly judicious. They weigh their words. They choose their fights. They know their mission. They understand their purpose.

I think the ALA should be like that. We should be outspoken in our advocacy for libraries and access to information, and just as importantly we should be careful to speak well and to speak infrequently. Let us remember that like any professional organization, the ALA has only so much political capital. If we squander that capital, that influence, on issues unrelated to librarianship, we will have just that much less clout — that much less influence on issues that touch our profession directly.

The ALA’s mission statement makes this point better than I. It insists that we, librarians and library staff alike, are to “provide leadership for the development, promotion, and improvement of library and information services” — that we should do so, as the statement delineates, with a view “to enhance access to information for all.”² Such professional perimeters embolden our advocacy, but they also narrow our focus. We should speak out eloquently on censorship, champion literacy, and insist on the promotion of First Amendment Liberties. Doing so is within our sphere of influence, within our expertise and responsibility. Speaking out on non-library-related issues, however, only weakens our fundamental, primary mission. That we should never do.

Consequently, the ALA must reexamine its tendency (tempting though that tendency may be) to advocate certain controversial political positions that have little or no specific relation to the profession. ALA must, in a sense, regain its focus, remember why we are here and what we are about. Most importantly, the association should employ its precious political capital for the promotion and advocacy of libraries and librarianship — that and nothing more. 🐼

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sity can quickly establish its excellence, especially in the Humanities and most of the Social Sciences where the crop of qualified PhD’s far exceeds employment possibilities. Of course, the University will need to recruit a core of seasoned faculty with international reputations, but **Bill’s** generous funding should allow the University to get many of its top choices. I’ve heard the rumor that the University might move more slowly in the STM fields where the expense of laboratory space might not give as good a return on investment as in other areas. In addition, the outlook for federal government spending is not good over the next decade with

the explosive growth in deficits. I won’t mind if I can spend a little less on the exorbitantly expensive STM serials.

I think that I should go for now. I’ve probably said too much, but I hope to get useful comments from the progressive and forward thinking experts in the library and information science field. I’m quite willing to revise my plans. Who knows if another innovation as radical as the Internet is just around the corner. The rapid technological change has enriched some corporations and bankrupted others. (Think of **Microsoft** and **DOS** versus **Kodak** and film.) Why should things be any different for higher education and libraries? 🐼

Endnotes

1. For a copy of ALA’s press release and letter, see ALA’s Washington Office page: http://www.ala.org/ala/newspresscenter/news/pressreleases2009/august2009/pubop_w_o.cfm.
2. From the Coalition for Networked Information, A Compilation of Position Statements, Principles, Statutes, and Other Pertinent Statements. <http://www.cni.org/docs/infopols/ALA.html>.