ChangeMasters All: A Series on Librarians Who Steered a Clear Course toward the Twenty-First Century

An Interview with Dr. Jerry Campbell

Marcy Simons

Transformation is a key word in libraries today. American Library Association (ALA) 2007 President Leslie Burger created a series of Annual Conference 2007 programs based on the many ways that libraries have been transformed. The word "transformer," in every sense, fits Jerry Campbell.

First and foremost, Campbell transformed the way the profession thinks about library acquisitions budgets, but he is probably better known for his suggestions regarding the way reference work needed to be transformed. His thoughts were published nearly fifteen years ago, and slowly but surely these changes in how reference work is done in libraries are becoming more and more evident. His last article as a librarian on the state of libraries and their future outlook was in a 2006 *Educause* commentary. It was his last because in 2007 Campbell made the leap from library director to university president at the Claremont School of Theology in California.

Campbell's career began very modestly as a cataloger. He liked the job well enough, and after several years he took advantage of an opportunity that led to a position as the director of technical services in the Ira J. Taylor Library at the Iliff School of Theology in Denver. Jerry says today that it was fun to work at a small school where he got to do a little bit of everything. At that time, libraries were just beginning to automate, and Campbell played a pivotal role by writing a grant proposal for an automated system. As a result of those efforts, he also then became the de facto systems librarian.

There is a natural progression in his curriculum vitae that can be seen in his career choices. Campbell left Iliff to become the director of the Birdwell Library at Southern Methodist University's Perkins School of Theology in Denver, where he served for five years. During that time he was approached by Duke University because of his experience with technology, as they were having difficulties getting their library automated. After several months of discussions, as he says, "I was surprised when they called and asked me to become the Vice Provost for Library Affairs and University Librarian and automate their library."

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Shaking Things Up

It was during his time at Duke when Campbell first started to shake things up. Asked if there was one pivotal moment in the vocation that he identified with, he said it was the move to Duke University from Southern Methodist. It was, after all, during his tenure at Duke where he began writing about things he saw that "had to change." The article, "Shaking the Conceptual Foundations of Reference," was published in 1992. "Actually, that wasn't the first time I was known to shake things up," Campbell says. "My article, 'Academic Library Budgets: Changing "The Sixty-Forty Split,"' was very controversial at the time (1989). In fact, it was seen as such a slanderous suggestion that I actually got a call from the 'Big Heads' (a very well-known technical services group) demanding that I go to their next meeting in Chicago and defend such poor thinking."
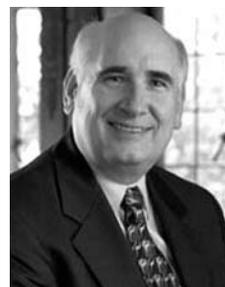
Dr. Jerry Campbell

Campbell's argument in this article was that libraries should consider a change of the practiced sixty-forty budget split and shift funds from staff to materials, access, and technology–a very different way of thinking. When asked how he responded to the Big Heads, Jerry replied, "Well, I said I don't respond to demands, but I told him if he wanted to invite me to speak on the article, I would be happy to. So he did, and I went, and you could feel the tension in the room as everyone there was waiting to hear what I had to say. Well, we were all waiting on the facilitator who would mediate the discussion and I could feel all eyes on me, and they weren't friendly eyes. Finally, the gentleman came into the room, went to the podium, apologized for being late and started by saying: 'Dr. Campbell, I was going to start by asking how dare you make these kinds of statements, however, I was late because I was on the phone with my library budget officer and our budget has been cut . . . so now I'd like to ask you: what do we do now?' The whole atmosphere of the room changed, the tension dissipated, and it actually turned out to be a very good discussion and interaction."

Personally, the article that I was most interested in talking with Campbell about was his "Shaking the Conceptual Foundation of Reference" (1992). It was considered a staple reading assignment in my MLS coursework, and I often heard it referred to by colleagues and others as well. It is within the framework of change in libraries that he was asked to write the article, and it is clear to see from the beginning why it was controversial.

In reviewing a literature review of reference, Campbell describes his findings, including the fact that there seems to be no conclusive answer to the question "what do reference librarians actually do and how much?" He writes,

> [S]ome swear by bibliographic instruction; others swear at it. Some avow that the reference desk should be the center of the reference universe; others vow that it is the center of the problem. Some proclaim a philosophy of equal service to

Career Highlights of Dr. Jerry Campbell

Education

- PhD (American history) University of Denver, 1982; Dissertation: "Biblical Criticism in America 1858–1929: The Emergence of the Historical Critic"
- MSLS (library science) University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1972
- MDiv (summa cum laude) The Divinity School, Duke University, 1971
- BA (summa cum laude) McMurray College, 1968

Professional History

Claremont School of Theology, President, 2006–present

University of Southern California
- Chief information officer and university librarian (1997–2006)
- Dean of the university libraries and university librarian (1996–97)

Duke University
- Vice provost for library affairs and university librarian (1985–95)
- Professor for the practice of theological bibliography (1985–95)
- Vice provost for computing (1989–94)

Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University
- Director, Bridwell Library (1980–85)
- Associate professor (1980–85)

The Iliff School of Theology
- Director of library and bookstore operations (1978–80)
- Director, Ira J. Taylor Library (1976–78)
- Assistant professor (1976–80)
- Assistant/associate librarian/director of technical services (1972–76)

Select Publications and Addresses

Campbell has published nearly forty articles and book chapters and has given more than seventy invited addresses on educational, administrative, and theological topics. The following is a representative sample of his scholarship.

"Still Shaking the Conceptual Foundations of Reference: A Perspective," *Reference Librarian* 48, no. 3 (2007).

"Changing a Cultural Icon: The Academic Library As a Virtual Destination" (cover article), *Educause Review*, Jan./Feb. 2005.

"Scholars Portal," *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science* (Marcel Decker, 2003).

"Scholars Portal as Metaphor," Address for the EBSCO Executive Seminar, ALA Midwinter Meeting, New Orleans, Jan. 2002.

"The Impact of Digital Technology on Libraries: A Chaotic Revolution," in *Development of Digital Libraries: An American Perspective*, ed. by Deanna B. Marcum (Greenwood Press, 2001).

"Evolving Effective Organizations in an Age of Technology: Beyond University Libraries as Separate Divisions," in *Proceedings of the International Conference on New Missions of Academic Libraries in the 21st Century*, Oct. 25–28, 1998, Beijing, China (Beijing: Peking Univ. Pr., 1998).

"Back into the Refiner's Fire: Re-Casting Universities for a New Century," The 32nd Michael Harrah Wood Memorial Lecture, The University of the South (Sewanee, Tenn.), Jan. 1998.

"Building Xanadu: Creating the New Library Paradise," *Collection Management* 22, no. 3/4 (Sept. 1998).

"Building an Effectiveness Pyramid for Leading Successful Organization Transformation," in *Library Administration and Management* 10 (Spring 1996).

"Getting Comfortable with Change: A New Budget Model for Libraries in Transition," *Library Trends* 42 (Winter 1994).

"Shaking the Conceptual Foundations of Reference," *Reference Services Review* 20 (1992).

"Should a Baldheaded Man Tell a Barefaced Lie: The Real Truth about Reference," Address to the Annual Meeting of the South Carolina Library Association, Greenville, S.C., Nov. 1991.

"Fundraising," *North Carolina Libraries* 44, no. 4 (Winter 1986).

all; others concentrate on a primary constituency. Some say that when a seeker asks for a fish, we should teach her to fish; others say that we should give her a fish. Some argue that all questions should come directly to reference professionals; others propose an intermediate, other than a professionally staffed desk to filter out directional and other routine questions. . . . Since reference service represents an evolved set of practices that have been conceptually unaltered for perhaps a hundred years, reference librarians are focused on debating how they should function, setting goals and guidelines, rather than asking the more fundamental questions of what they should do and why.[1]

Today, one can hardly argue with the logic; however such remarks were probably considered blasphemous sixteen years ago, even as his final remarks try to soften the blow.

Indeed, my hope is to find means to increase the quantity and quality of our work through the wise use of technology and to bring about change for the sake of the survival of our professional and the information future of our culture. I have no agenda to damage librarians or our profession. I am willing to say, however, that librarians seem to be self-destructing and that without radical changes in what we do our future will be limited and brief.[2]

When asked if he ever noticed a change in the tide where people actually started to agree with him, Campbell responded that he didn't think the reference article would be controversial. He went on to share that the initial responses from people were varied–some people wouldn't talk to him at all, about a third of the people were really angry, and about half the people were conflicted. They wanted to be mad but also saw some truth in what he was saying. And about one-tenth of the people had the same "a-ha" moment. His writing of the reference article was responsible for precipitating change conversations. Campbell says he was then asked frequently by editors to be provocative, and to write articles that would start conversations about controversial topics–in his words, "I became the 'precipitator.'" He added, "People loved to hate me, but they would eventually come around."

Campbell did provide his response (of sorts) to the article in a keynote address to the Rethinking Reference Workshop, sponsored by Library Solutions in Iowa City, Iowa, one year after the article was published. In the address he talked about how an e-mail communication sealed his fate. He went on to say that the editor "indicated that it would be acceptable–no, that it would be preferable if I would propose something that would stimulate a vigorous discussion of reference issues among reference librarians. Well, I might not be an expert in matters of reference, but hardly anyone can claim to provoke librarians more than I." It is clear why Campbell was asked to be this precipitator of conversations. He had the vision more than a decade ago of what the future looked like for libraries, and because of his love for the profession he wanted to do what he could to start changing people's minds.

Campbell continued to write about change, especially with regard to technology. Even as early as 1991, he was encouraging those in the profession to look ahead and see that we would need a commitment to "mission, not means"; to become the "drivers, not the passengers"; and that librarians needed to have more faith in themselves. These words resound loudly today as we hear more and more about UX–the "user experience." In 1994, Campbell wrote an article titled "Building Xanadu: Creating the New Library Paradise," which outlined a survey of faculty and students conducted by two librarians at Duke. In it he described the changing needs and expectations of users, suggesting possible strategies to revitalize library service. He keenly admonishes the reader to "get better" at "learning more about our users' preferences and expectations."[3]

Campbell is frequently quoted in programs and presentations. When I asked him how this makes him feel, he said "Well, that depends on how the information was presented. Was it in a positive or negative way?" When I say that it is definitely positive because he has been quoted as someone who "gets" where libraries need to be and the direction they need to be heading in the future, he says "well, I guess that's a good thing."

From Librarian to University President

In 2006, Campbell made the transition from librarian to university president at Claremont School of Theology. Since it is rather rare for a librarian to achieve the rank of president, I sought his thoughts on how his library background prepared him for this new role. He said, "I suspect librarians may not find it surprising that in my two years as a president, I have found my experience as a librarian to be a solid foundation for the role."

One essential aspect of library experience that stands out is the ability to deal with both small and large staffs during years of rapid change (particularly from the onset of digital technology). This change carried with it considerable trauma and anxiety, as every job was affected. Since such change is far from over, anyone who has led libraries during the past three decades has had ample opportunity to gain the critical people skills necessary and appropriate for the office of president.

A second way in which library leadership has prepared Campbell for the role of president relates to managing complex relationships with constituencies, particularly faculty. He notes that as libraries changed over the past genera-

tion, the changes were not only challenging for librarians but were difficult for library users as well. The issues involved both moving beyond emotional attachments to the printed book and changing long-held research habits. To make matters even more complex, library users did not present a unified viewpoint. Often, library leaders were admonished by some to abandon digital library efforts, even as they were criticized by others for not moving the digital agenda fast enough. "This environment was an excellent crucible for learning to work successfully in the midst of differing interests, and this is a useful skill for any president," Campbell said.

Finally, Campbell notes that his library experience prepared him for the role of president by teaching him some "serious lessons about financial resources. I never served a library that had enough financial support, and I never directed a library that did not at one time or another have to make substantial budget cuts. This taught me how to go about reducing a budget without destroying core mission, and it gave me some crucial fundraising experience. Again, these are necessary skills for any president in the context of higher education today."

To end our conversation, I asked Campbell if his experience as a university president has led him to think any differently about the place of libraries in higher education. He remains convinced that the place of libraries in higher education is changing and that his ideas have and will continue to evolve as the "digital paradigm matures." For example, he thinks that interest in electronic books has finally reached "the tipping point," and that the impending paradigm shift represents another signal that the place of libraries in higher education is in the midst of "a transformation, the parameters of which are yet to be known. What is different is that I let the library director worry about it."

My conversations with Campbell left me feeling that he was, unquestionably, someone who gets where libraries need to be, and I was very interested in learning why and how he made the leap from university librarian to university president. In response he said simply: "Well, I knew when I was reading someone's blog earlier this year and I happened to notice my name and this person said 'Campbell is no longer on the cutting edge.' And I thought, 'It's time to move on.' Then I thought, 'I guess that's a good sign.' It's a good sign because it means the transition continues beyond where I took it twenty years ago. And I'm okay with that."

References

1. Jerry Campbell, "Shaking the Conceptual Foundations of Reference," *Reference Services Review* 20, no. 4 (1992): 30.
2. Ibid., 31.
3. Campbell, "Building Xanadu: Creating the New Library Paradise," *Collection Management* 22, no. 3/4 (Sept. 1998): 26.