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Escaping the Island of Lost Faculty: Collaboration as a Means of Visibility

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Abstract

Academic librarians are often physically and intellectually isolated at their institutions, and they need to accept much of the blame. Professional literature shows that librarians continue to argue against the responsibilities of tenure, despite the fact that in two of the three usual rubrics of tenure and promotion—namely publication and service—the expectations for both teaching faculty and librarians are generally the same. In addition, academic librarians will not be treated equally unless they begin to think and work outside of the physical academic library. This article argues for a multidisciplinary approach to academic librarianship, with an emphasis on collaboration as a means to develop visibility through presentations at every level, publications in multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journals, professional memberships in organizations outside of librarianship, and active, vocal committee participation. By reinventing themselves as both subject/discipline and research methods experts, academic librarians will achieve greater exposure as bona fide scholars at their institutions.

“Lost”

For academic librarians, achieving tenure may not be their first, nor even their most difficult, professional hurdle. Although they can claim common lineage (and in some cases, a common terminal degree) with many of their teaching counterparts in departments as varied as Languages and Literature, Biology, Education, and Psychology, they more likely than not find themselves having to defend their status as tenure-track faculty. The sad truth is teaching faculty are often unaware that in academia, librarians often have faculty status; and even when they are made aware of this, and while they often understand library faculty status in theory, most have trouble appreciating it in practice. On many higher education campuses throughout the United States, the disconnect between academic librarians (who take as their calling the preservation not only of materials but also of the institutional research mission) and members of both administration and the teaching faculty (who interact with academic librarians only when they wish to order materials or request a one-shot library resource session) seems like

an impassable divide. This gap is the result of many forces, not the least of which is the failure of many university administrations to realize the critical importance of information literacy to the mission of any teaching and research institution. This mindset trickles down, leading to the failure of far too many teaching faculty to see the library as anything but a building full of books and people who check them out to students. The tremors of this disconnect rock the core of the profession, producing a state of confusion even among academic librarians. Our academic colleagues tend to be significantly unaware of our function in the university, perhaps because we are the only faculty members who are neither teaching faculty nor administration, or perhaps because we spend so much time within the four walls of the library. This has changed little since Engle noted that, “. . . the long-term costs of working exclusively inside the library can also be high: a profound sense of isolation, low morale, and a lack of vigorous external support for the collections and staff of the library.”¹ Even within the last decade, Johnson described this liminal existence as being

"marginalized into a special academic ghetto."²

Obviously, much of the problem lies outside of the library—but to some degree it is not unexpected given that generally academia thrives on credentials, and the terminal degree for librarians is the Masters degree. As Cubberley theorizes, librarians "...have missed the acculturation to academia that is part of the process of earning the advanced degree.... [and have therefore] not participated in research with a major professor, nor identified their own research interest," further arguing that "the emphasis of library and information science education has been on providing service, not on publishing and doing research."³ What Cubberley hints at is painful to admit: academic librarians have been complicit in their marginalization, sometimes standing by tentatively, having been elbowed aside as academic faculty make a mad rush toward tenure. Having recently gone through a revamping of Nicholls State University's peer review process, we can attest to a disturbing trend where increasingly librarians concentrate not on how their merit status is comparable to other faculty, but rather how it should be entirely different, not only in teaching status, but in research and publication expectations as well. As is usually the case, we discovered that longing to be separate leads to not being considered equal. More than a decade ago, Veaner observed that "teaching and research faculty rarely perceive librarians as their academic peers," regardless of their having faculty status and regardless of sometimes being given for-credit teaching assignments.⁴ As recently as 2005, the literature reflects this same problem, as Hill argues,

... in considering what form a tenure system for librarians should take, it would be advisable to test each difference between what applies to library faculty and what applies to teaching faculty and ask whether that difference is necessary and desirable. Every variance may highlight librarians as different; and, in an academic setting, 'different' is

perilously apt (to) be interpreted as "lesser."⁵

The Tribal Council

Given the budget crises that so many academic institutions face today and which force administrators to reevaluate every department and program on campus, it is time academic librarians start asking themselves hard questions: Is the current situation irreversible? Is there a remedy? How does the academic librarian—the minimized, marginalized, forgotten faculty member, become visible (and hopefully perceived as valuable) on his or her campus and possibly in the larger academic community? In one word, *collaboration* is the answer. The word connotes not just communication, but a sharing of responsibility as well. The overwhelming question we must address is what exactly does the concept of collaboration entail when viewed in the context of academe. For any academic librarian, the act of collaboration begins early in our careers when we first serve as members of university committees. But one can easily attend every meeting of any given committee and still remain virtually invisible, becoming like one of the forgotten freshmen who sits in the back of the classroom. If this is the case at your institution, we hope this article will offer not only some sense of commiseration—but also a few practical suggestions and solutions.

The Island of Misfit Faculty

Despite the ongoing argument over faculty status and tenure in academic librarianship, both are becoming the accepted norm. Recent survey reports by Cary⁶ and Welch and Moenter⁷ show this trend continuing. Regardless, Benefiel, Miller, Moseley and Arant-Kaspar note that the issue of tenure and faculty status is still hotly contested within our own ranks: "Faculty status for librarians, in almost every aspect, is one of the most discussed issues in the library literature. Faculty status for librarians is often questioned, while the status of teaching faculty is seldom at issue."⁸ Hill best sums up

the two sides of the argument when writing of her own interior struggle with the idea of tenure:

At one time, I was among those who believed that faculty status and tenure for librarians were, at best, irrelevant and, at worst, deceptions and distractions from our primary mission. However, over time and based on following the literature of librarianship and of university teaching, discussing the matter with colleagues, and applying information and ideas thus gathered to my own experience, I have come to regard faculty status and tenure as both justifiable and beneficial.⁹

Granted, there are those who champion the argument that pursuing excellence in the activities that help determine tenure and promotion deters academic librarians from their primary duties of serving a patron population. These people have a valid point. After all, we can stretch ourselves so thin that we risk pulling ourselves apart. Nonetheless, most in the field either enjoy, or wish to enjoy, the obvious advantages of faculty status: better job security, academic freedom, an equitable minimum salary, inclusion in institutional governance. The important aspect of faculty status is that it affirms a full-time commitment to faculty development. On most campuses, this requires *all* faculty members to become engaged in the dialogue that seeks to improve our abilities beyond teaching techniques to include those skills that make us more proficient researchers and more scholarly and prolific writers. These responsibilities cannot be overstated; they are fundamental to the success of any college or university. They are, in essence, the critical elements that make up academia. Either academic librarians have to accept this expanded role or admit that they have little interest in faculty development. The problem with the latter is that by lacking interest in development, librarians who are faculty members place themselves outside of the system that protects them. Make no mistake, this is just a small step away from relegating ourselves to the

same level as an instructor, since there may be few other possibilities in the current system. If this were to occur, academic librarians would suffer in terms of job security, salary equity, and administrative support.

But there is an even larger issue at hand: the very essence of what it means to be an academic librarian, as opposed to a public or special librarian. Veaner best sums up the rigorous life of an academic librarian in his chapter, "Generic Duties and Responsibilities of Librarians." His list of responsibilities makes clear that academic librarians work not for their libraries, but for their universities and for the university system as a whole. An academic librarian must have:

an appreciation of academic librarianship as a life of the mind and as work of a high order of intellectual endeavor;

acknowledgment of continuing education as a key element in the maintenance of one's capacity for problem solving;

a commitment to look beyond the local environment to the profession at large, coupled to a corresponding commitment to contribute and reach out to the profession in a variety of ways, such as publication, professional improvement, and systematic communication with colleagues in other academic libraries;

the understanding that a librarian is foremost an analyst, designer, organizer, communicator, manager, and problem solver, not a mere operative who carries out only designated duties;

the understanding of the organic character of the library and the role of professionals as persons who see the library as a totality, accept the institution's mission, goals, and objectives as their own, and work for the benefit of the school as a whole.¹⁰

In the words of Hall and Byrd, "we are librarians *in* the university, not librarians *at* the library located *at* the university."¹¹ Or to

put it in Hoadley's blunt, ominous terms, "if librarians act like faculty, they must be faculty; if they act like clerks, they are probably perceived as clerks."¹²

We believe this assessment is accurate, despite the fact that academic librarians as a group are beginning to realize they hold a unique status on campuses. Of all university faculty, today's academic librarians are most likely to have advanced degrees in more than one discipline. A 2005 survey by Mayer and Terrill indicates that 81% of some 1200 librarian respondents believe that a second advanced degree is either "definitely necessary" or "necessary,"¹³ and this trend is unlikely to change. While having advanced degrees in two disciplines *should* mean that we inherit the best of both professional worlds, it is often not the case, since, as stated previously, academic librarians far too often remain within the confines of the library's four walls, and even those with a second Masters are likely to be viewed as "lesser scholars" by faculty who have Doctorates—even those in the same discipline—resulting in intellectual as well as physical marginalization.

The Shore of an Uncharted Desert Isle

In order to become more visible as academic faculty, academic librarians have to not only think outside of their box-shaped building, but must actively venture physically outside of the protective but restrictive enclosure which librarianship itself has become. In doing so, we remind other faculty that we are both professional and productive, that we offer more than simply "service with a smile" when they need it. We have to remind teaching faculty that, as McFadden reminds us, librarians bring more than just research skills to academe. They bring subject specialties and often teaching experience, and these combinations can greatly benefit students.¹⁴ Since a growing number of academic librarians have a second Masters and/or a Doctorate in the humanities, social sciences, or the sciences, they could be considered multidisciplinary experts. If the expertise associated with the second Masters

or Doctorate is used wisely by library management, and academic librarians with second graduate degrees are allowed to act as liaisons in their secondary area, this will likely garner great respect from teaching faculty; unfortunately, there is no guarantee that librarians will be made the liaisons in the secondary area of expertise, as the administration of collection development funds and other liaison responsibilities such as guest lecturing are often assigned based on other criteria, a practice which may further weaken an academic librarian's claim to expertise. As part of our collaborative responsibilities, we must redefine ourselves as scholar librarians, and build bridges to the professional worlds of teaching faculty through multidisciplinary presentations and publications, either individually or as part of academic research teams. One underused option academic librarians have always had at their disposal is the solicitation of teaching and research faculty for collaborative publication projects. According to a survey conducted by Bahr and Zemon in 1999, academic librarians lag behind other academics when it comes to collaborative research. This, then, is certainly one area in which a new generation of multidisciplinary research experts can make great inroads.¹⁵

The same progressive thinking should be applied to the types of conferences and workshops we attend. Obviously, the best way to make oneself visible professionally to non-library faculty is to go where they go, and to show them that we are more than competent reference question researchers and guest lecturers by allowing them to interact with us as colleagues in a specific discipline. By expanding our professional endeavors through attending, presenting at, and serving as panelists at conferences and meetings of organizations that are not solely library-oriented, we get exposure as collaborators. It is good practice to keep current our memberships in non-library professional organizations and thus avoid defining ourselves too narrowly as experts at the techniques of librarianship only. We have compelling reason to join professional organizations that may exist on the periphery of the

information science field. For example, at our library, we have librarians with advanced degrees in literature, creative writing, musicology, philosophy, and history; three of these librarians have Doctorates. Not only is it a great waste of human resources for them to stop attending conferences, or to cease to research and publish in what have become their secondary fields of interest and study, it would be professionally negligent of them to do so, as long as they avoid ignoring day-to-day librarian responsibilities, or responsibilities to academic librarianship. Academic librarians who find themselves in such positions must view their academic duties more broadly. Of course, having academic librarians who straddle the fence professionally presupposes a forward-thinking director or dean and a cutting edge peer review system, perhaps even one that de-prioritizes the usual call to service to the profession in the form of serving on regional and national committees, which could make it difficult to attend non-library conferences annually. The problem lies in the fact that academic librarianship is a standards-based profession, and librarians generally have a highly pronounced service orientation. However, it would be remiss of our regional and national organizations to not allow for virtual attendance at business and board meetings, especially if physical attendance becomes a barrier to scholarship, networking, and collaboration. Considering the influx of librarians with advanced degrees in other disciplines, directors, library deans, and regional/national librarian organization may be faced with the necessity of finding ways to allow library faculty to be professionally active in two fields.

There are many advantages to participating in conferences in disciplines outside the library field. The most obvious benefit is that doing so maximizes the chance we will encounter and interact with our *other* colleagues—the non-library faculty. Conferences hosted by regional or national chapters of professional organizations for scholars of languages, literature, education, popular culture, and history are high profile events that normally attract a diversity of

researchers, and these conferences can and should be of interest to academic librarians. By the same token, regional meetings and university sponsored symposia and colloquia often emphasize subject matter that is relevant to any academic librarian—the written word, language, literature, pedagogy, documentation and the freshman year experience. Becoming professionally involved with such events allows academic librarians to show a spirit of true collaboration in the interest of lifelong learning. In a 2007 study of some 800 librarians, Vega and Connell found that the two most important reasons academic librarians attended conferences were rejuvenation and networking. These outranked attending exhibits, meetings, poster sessions, and round tables.¹⁶ If this is the case, then attending multidisciplinary conferences, meetings, and workshops should be especially appealing since they would lead to a larger network that includes non-librarians.

The downside, no doubt, to becoming a multidisciplinary expert is that it is a time-consuming pursuit. Attending some three conferences annually, or juggling a combination of conferences and workshops/webinars is a daunting task for any academic librarian, despite the fact that the primary responsibilities of faculty, other than teaching, include research, networking, information sharing, and publishing. While we cannot clone ourselves to be in three places at once, there is no reason, other than the occasional period of austerity, that any academic librarian cannot manage one regional and one local conference annually, and one national conference every other year. Simply alternating library-oriented with multidisciplinary conferences year by year would allow for the ideal balance, providing library directors are supportive.

Those academic librarians who heed this call, including those who for years have been “academic fence sitters,” are going to find themselves leaning towards publishing more often in non-traditional, possibly even non-library-oriented, scholarly peer-reviewed journals. While doing so will cer-

tainly tax one's research and writing capabilities, there is probably no better method of making an impression on our non-library colleagues, especially if the articles are collaborations between librarians and faculty in other disciplines. There are other collaborative outlets we can pursue, such as organizational newsletters. Academic librarians need not immediately volunteer to be newsletter editors or even staff writers; it may be a good idea to first become a contributor, as this would allow potential editors and writers to become acquainted with an organizational newsletter's production process.

Librarians also should not overlook the two most obvious opportunities for publication: journals that carry or specialize in book reviews as well as reference sources in the various disciplines. Reference librarians are more than familiar with publishing trends for dictionaries and encyclopedias as well as literary biographies and bibliographies. Librarians with a second Masters degree or having a secondary area of expertise are potential authors. Excellent research skills, a willingness to work with an editor and within an editorial timeline, and broad subject expertise uniquely position librarians as partners in the publishing world. Publications exist that address key aspects of any given discipline, so there are many opportunities to make a contribution. As well, many online journals are gaining in reputation, and these increasingly will play an important role in scholarly communication. One should also remember, librarians who present at a conference can also submit the presentation for consideration in published proceedings.

In terms of collaboration, academic librarians can distinguish themselves by capitalizing on two of the traits that often define professionals in our field: civic mindedness and an eye for detail. In any collaborative grant-writing project, our skill set makes us invaluable members of the project team. Librarians can emphasize collegiality by volunteering to help write grants with non-library faculty (or even with community groups not associated with our institutions

directly). Since much grant writing involves extensive use of statistical information, few professionals are better suited to research and present these data. If the grant is awarded and results in substantial funding, the chances are excellent that the librarian's contribution will be recognized in the university's publications, and possibly even in local media sources, giving visibility to both the librarian and the library — all helping to establish the professional, faculty-level status of librarians.

Blowing into the Conch

Academic librarians attempting to gain name and face recognition on their campuses can do so by means other than just getting their names in print sources. Academic librarians can achieve high profile status by making their presence known through service to the university community. Granted, some institutions make it difficult, if not impossible, for librarians to serve on faculty senate or curriculum committees, but research by Welch and Mozenter indicates that 86.5% of the institutions surveyed make librarians eligible for campus-wide committees, and that on 95.7% of those, librarians have voting privileges. The two also found that in 78.8% of the institutions surveyed, librarians can serve on Faculty Senate and 100% have voting rights.¹⁷ Regardless of whether or not our own colleges and universities routinely allow librarians on campus-wide committees, it is essential that when they are placed on committees, librarians become *involved*. Note the emphasis on the word involved. While most academic librarians are more than willing to serve as chairs, co-chairs, and members of library committees, many avoid, or eschew altogether, serving on those university-wide committees that are most active and most prominent. Although we completely understand the decision to do so — after all, librarians to begin with have enough duties and responsibilities to the library proper and therefore may feel they are being stretched too thin to take on bigger responsibilities to the university as a whole — we cannot help but feel that the benefits of getting involved

in the larger academic community far outweigh the costs of time and energy.

Library faculty would also do well to remember that they have the same rights as other faculty members to run for a university committee chair position or to move up through a committee's ranks by offering to be one of its officers. There is also the possibility that the committee will need specialized knowledge in order to make some of its decisions. If this is the case, librarians would be remiss not to demonstrate their research skills in gathering information for committee reports and in helping committee members make more informed decisions. This not only allows librarians to represent themselves as scholars, it also enables them to emphasize *collaboration* instead of only *service*, as the former term suggests work accomplished among peers, not tasks carried out by subordinates. The library is as much a part of the university community as any specific program or college, and our non-librarian colleagues often need to be reminded of this. Many of the agenda items discussed by committees affect the library directly or indirectly, so vocal representatives of the library should be involved whenever they are allowed by university administration to be so. The benefits of active committee work are numerous and crucial: collegiality and friendship, involvement and governance, participation in planning and budgeting, image control, developing relationships as peers, and library representation.

We have had the good fortune of seeing this theory put into practice at Nicholls State University. For instance, we always have two librarians on faculty senate, thereby differentiating us from institutions that do not allow librarians direct access to faculty governance. One of our representatives has served for three years. He has learned about important issues affecting the entire university system that he might not have known about otherwise. More importantly, he has met face to face many of the faculty whom he previously knew only by name. He routinely offered the library's cooperation at

senate meetings, emphasizing librarians' research expertise, as well as suggesting that the physical space of the library could serve as a meeting place for subcommittees. Such active involvement in the senate reminds other faculty members that librarians have worthwhile ideas to offer. He also benefitted personally by learning more about the parliamentary process. He became involved in an ad hoc committee to make a recommendation on methods of equitably dividing funds among all faculty. Collegiality and friendship, aside from being important professional values, also make university employment that much more personally rewarding and enjoyable. Moreover, being an active member of the faculty senate brought him to the attention of the administration, so he was able to emphasize, when appropriate, the problems with a budget that severely limited library resources. And the possibility for a librarian's serving as faculty senate president or chair may well exist at various institutions, since the literature notes that precedence for this does exist.¹⁸

The high profile of two of our librarians in their involvement with the Southern Association on Colleges and Schools (SACS) accreditation process and our institution's Quality Enhancement Plan led to their selection as two of the three individuals to represent the entire university at the 2007 Annual Conference on Critical Thinking, hosted by Criticalthinking.org. Since then, both have been asked to speak about their experiences with SACS accreditation at statewide leadership conferences and consortia colloquia, and both now have important roles on the Faculty Development Committee, one of the most powerful committees on campus.

In the best case scenario, this type of exposure leads to a more collaborative atmosphere between library and non-library faculty, and academic librarians can follow up on such opportunities by forming additional effective partnerships at their institutions. These collaborative efforts lead to better recognition of librarians on the academic campus, especially in the realms of information literacy and collection development.

Where these two aspects of librarianship ensure that the librarian's role on any academic campus is central to the mission of the institution. They further attest to the librarian's position as the most qualified faculty member to teach research methodology in most any field. Aggressive marketing of our collection development role also requires significant collaboration in developing relationships where discipline liaisons feel comfortable contacting us and where other academic department heads routinely invite us to attend departmental meetings. By proactively sending e-mail messages and making phone calls to instructors and professors who might be interested, library faculty can better collaborate when building the collection.

The Bridge to Academia

Librarians need to get out of the comfort zone the academic library affords and find ways to interact with other faculty. Because service is considered one of the three major criteria upon which merit is established, academic librarians should take advantage of opportunities to vocally and actively participate in university- and student-sponsored social events such as serving as judges for competitions, as faculty advisors for official student organizations, or as organizers of events that combine student learning with socialization. These latter events become golden opportunities for networking with faculty and students. Such opportunities abound no matter where librarians are employed. Theatrical productions by the drama department, voice and ensemble recitals by music departments, and periodic research seminars (in which scholars from the institution take time out to discuss their research projects) should be seen as ways to discover shared interests that may lead to potential collaborative projects. Such instances for camaraderie offer chances not only to promote the library as a research center, but also as means to advertise and market library programs. In effect, there is a dual return on the librarian's investment. Librarians could make inroads in establishing their faculty status

designation by capitalizing on opportunities to design workshops on database access and research practices as well as to team teach courses with willing professors. Another benefit to this type of proactive personal marketing is, as distance learning and faculty development consultant Michael Scheuerman explains, getting more "face" time with students and faculty. "In many cases, I think librarians are looking for this type of connection with real things that are happening in real classes with real students and real educators in a dynamic situation."¹⁹

Off The Island? Not a Fantasy

Academic librarians have come a long way since Whitlatch published *The Role of the Academic Reference Librarian*.²⁰ A quick perusal of her index reveals that the words "committee," "faculty status," and "publications" do not even appear. However, the words "service" and the variant phrase "service orientation" appear quite often. To place this in context, we need to remember that in 1988 the Academic Status Committee of the Association of College and Research Libraries released its report, *Academic Status: Statements and Resources* (ALA-ACRL). This is the committee that had been involved since 1959 in promoting faculty status and tenure for academic librarians. Since many academic librarians now have faculty status and are tenure track, the job description of a typical librarian has changed drastically. Librarians are now expected to publish, present at conferences, and serve on as many committees as humanly possible. In fact, most librarians probably fielded questions concerning their attitudes on these expectations during pre-employment interviews. Ferrier suggests that the image academic librarians project "affects the way in which they are treated, and thus, their effectiveness in performing their jobs."²¹ In other words, we determine our own futures by adopting new attitudes, by redefining our expectations of ourselves and by acting accordingly. We must remain vigilant in affirming ourselves as bona fide faculty members of the institutions we serve, for even our allies sometime forget that we are more

than service points. A 2007 ACRL online blog posting, for example, entitled "So You Think You're an Expert Academic Librarian" illustrates a commonly held notion:

First, your performance must be consistently superior to that of your peers. Wow, that's going to be a tough one to prove for most academic librarians. Are you making better decisions than academic librarians at all other academic libraries? Do you get more reference questions right than your colleague at Big State University? It's not like we have batting averages. Second, real expertise must produce concrete results. Again, that's not easy to measure. I may have delivered a competent instruction session, but what if students go straight to Google afterwards and get poor grades on their research papers. That would appear to be a case of not producing concrete results. But if we could measure outcomes it might be possible to identify those academic librarians who are highly effective, much more effective than peers at achieving successful outcomes. Third, true expertise can be replicated and measured in the lab. Measure academic librarianship in the lab? Forget it.²²

This particular blog posting makes no mention whatsoever of upholding one's academic research standards while also serving up correct answers to reference questions. This, unfortunately for academic librarians, tends to be par for the course. Such an oversight underscores the problems with self-definition that the literature reflects. If we ourselves cannot remember that we are about more than just answering questions or performing "duties," how can we expect our colleagues among teaching faculty to do so? We cannot afford to define ourselves in terms of day-to-day work responsibilities only. Daily responsibilities constitute about one-third of the total scope of responsibili-

ties for all tenure-track faculty librarians. These are tasks librarians perform while they fulfill what should be their larger purpose as academic librarians – the holistic education and development of students, along with their professional development as true and full members of the institution's faculty cohort. Since this is a purpose shared with all university faculty members, opportunities for collaboration should be of foremost consideration. Librarians can better accomplish the monumental task of educating and developing young minds when they themselves are most effective; this best occurs not only when academic librarians are seen as equals by teaching faculty and administration, but also when they are, to put it simply, *seen*.

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- ¹⁸ Laurence S. Creider, "Two Years with a Tee-Ball Bat," *College & Research Libraries News* 69.8 (Sept. 2008): 476-477, 505.
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- ²² "So You Think You're an Expert Academic Librarian," ACRLblog, comment posted September 17, 2007, <http://acrlblog.org/2007/09/17/so-you-think-youre-an-expert-academic-librarian/> (accessed October 1, 2007).