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Letters to the Editor


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Letters to the Editor

As Government Information Librarians, we read with interest Peter Hernon and Laura Saunders survey of ARL directors perspectives on potential federal depository library program scenarios in 2023. We were particularly struck by the statement on p. 365 that several directors predicted that they would stop employing separate dedicated government documents librarians and by their assumption that government documents specialized knowledge would be passed to reference librarians.

This latter statement fails to recognize that government information librarians have evolved and enhance their skills to assist users needing electronic government information in textual, data, cartographic, and multimedia formats. This is occurring in traditional reference service venues and in online reference forums such as *Government Information Online*, blogs and RSS feeds, and through social networking mechanisms such as Facebook and Twitter. This applies to government information resources produced by local, state, federal, foreign, and international government organizations, and non-governmental organizations.

In our nearly collective forty-five years as Government Information Librarians in five different academic libraries in as many states across the county, our experience has been that most reference librarians, no matter how skilled or opportunistic, cannot make the ongoing intellectual commitment to learn and master the complexities of government information resources our users demand from our academic institutions. We believe most government information librarians will work side by side with their reference colleagues, but when push comes to shove in the demand to answer those complicated government information questions, most librarians and library staff still rely greatly on the expertise of government information librarians to resolve reference questions or address the challenges of teaching faculty, staff, and students the multiple complexities involved in finding answers to these questions.

Indeed, faculty in multiple disciplines spend years learning and mastering their areas of specialization and seeking to enhance its scholarship. A historian specializing in 20th century diplomatic history must master the diplomatic documentation, legislative oversight sources, unpublished archival resources, and

monographic and journal literature to teach their students and begin to communicate their research to scholars and other interested readers. These basic principles remain applicable in other disciplines throughout academe.

This also applies to government information librarianship and its practice in the 21st century. Government information librarians make an enduring commitment, if not a sense of religious like calling, to promote public access to government information resources from multiple time periods, across multiple governmental jurisdictions, and using formats as varied as print, microform, maps, statistics, and various web-based media. These librarians also recognize that they must learn about the historical, current, and emerging information publishing practices of these agencies representing an interdisciplinary variety of subjects, the historical development and ongoing evolution of these agencies policymaking programs and policymakers, and the political and policymaking contexts in which these agencies operate including the roles played by nongovernmental organizations and their information resources. These are skills that cannot be acquired by spasmodic osmosis but must be learned, cultivated, and sustained over several years and entire professional careers. Instead of retreating from the support and well trained government information specialists, library administrators should consider long-term strategies to keep these skills working on behalf of their library's community in the rapidly changing collection and service environment.

The likelihood of increasing governmental involvement in the U.S. and global economic, environmental, and energy and health care systems, regardless of what one thinks of the propriety and quality of such increased governmental activity, means that library users must be assured that trained and highly accomplished cadres of government information professionals will be able to guide them to the information they need. Expecting library users to find the government information resources they need through imprecise Google searches, federated searching databases, or the assistance of librarians and library support staff without intimate experience with government information resources is professional malpractice of the highest order! The belief that libraries will eventually no longer need government information librarians reflects misguided thinking. These trends actually increase the need for MLS programs and library staff development programs to train and nurture existing and aspiring

government information librarians if our users are to have realistic expectations of successfully meeting their government information needs.

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