



"Terry Belanger's roundtable discussion" in "Rare book and manuscript libraries in the twenty-first century, Part two, Session four: Roundtable discussion (four perspectives)"

Citation

Belanger, Terry. 1993. "Terry Belanger's roundtable discussion" in "Rare book and manuscript libraries in the twenty-first century, Part two, Session four: Roundtable discussion (four perspectives)". Harvard Library Bulletin 4 (2), Spring 1993: 113-114.

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Roundtable Discussion (Four Perspectives)

Terry Belanger

I seem alone among the participants at this symposium in never having been in this room before yesterday afternoon. Indeed, during the more placid stretches of the proceedings, I've been amusing myself by reading the names of the registrants and counting the number of those with "Harvard" in their addresses. There are seventy-eight persons on the list with "Harvard" as part of their mail addresses, or twenty-nine percent of the conference attendees. I congratulate the Houghton Library on running this conference for this reason alone: I'm sure that a conference such as this one does immeasurable good *within* an institution as well as outside it, from the point of view (in particular) of persons working in what are sometimes called the subject libraries. I know that in large institutions it's very difficult to meet your own colleagues.

As an outsider here I console myself with the recollection of the famous conversation between a passerby and Andrew Keogh, librarian at Yale, outside the then brand-new Sterling Memorial Library. The passerby asked, not knowing whom he was talking to, "Is that the library?" and Keogh replied, "No, the library is *inside*." Twenty-two persons in this room are graduates of the master's program in rare books at Columbia during my time there. (Others here are also graduates of the Columbia program, but before my time: I can claim no part in Mark McCorison's success, for one.) Twenty-four persons here have given one or more (and in some cases many) formal lectures to the Friends of the Book Arts Press, the support group for the Columbia rare book programs. Fifty-three persons here are Friends of the Book Arts Press, or about twenty percent of the whole, and seventy-four of you have attended Rare Book School, the annual Columbia summer institute, as either a student or as an instructor—or both. Thus nearly half of you have some sort of formal connection with the Columbia programs. Also here today are dozens of other persons with whom I've been a partner in one sort of rare books crime or other over the years. Many of you could also play this sort of game with the participants' names, and so I think you will agree with my contention that in this symposium we are essentially talking to ourselves.

But I am struck by Henry Snyder's comment yesterday, pointing out that provosts often think differently from the way *we* do, and that it behooves us to find out what provosts are thinking, especially if what *they* think is different from what *we* think, because they finally control our destiny: provosts, presidents, and boards, all of whom I think tend *not* to think the way we think.

Rare book libraries are facing very difficult and very complicated times, far more so than has been suggested by the generally cheerful tenor of the talks from this



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podium over the past couple of days. It was suggested yesterday that there are four ways to insert a microfiche into a reader, only one of which is right; but that statement is incorrect: there are *eight* ways of inserting a microfiche into a reader; and, while I am aware that many of you in this room can, after a fashion, read upside down and backwards, I think we all agree that it is not the easiest way to do so. There are many possible solutions, but most of them don't work very well.

Part of my gloom possibly stems from the fact that until recently I was connected with a library school that has now bit the dust—as many library schools have. And I was struck by the appropriateness of Michael Ryan's comment, that too many rare books libraries have an attitude along the lines of "I have, therefore I have a right to exist." Similarly, many institutions have a tendency to think "I do good, therefore I have the right to exist." That is, however, not necessarily what provosts and presidents and boards think. As regards universities in particular (the part of the landscape that I know best) I think we are dealing with the twilight of the book, old or new, in its present codex format. I think that many of you agree with me, or rather suspect that this is likely to be the case, and that you came to this symposium—a very well attended one—partially because of this concern. The fish in the aquarium don't notice the water until the level in the tank begins to sink.

I was further struck by the wider application of David McKitterick's astute remark that most books exist in an alien environment. The makers of most books never expected or intended them to end up in a research library. I think those professionally concerned with rare books are finding themselves similarly in an increasingly alien environment.

Increasingly we're going to have to elbow our way to the resources, financial and physical. This is not impossible: you *can* insert a microfiche into the machine the right way. But here is the great problem, it seems to me. We need good people in rare book libraries, and we don't have enough of them. If we have a sufficiency of good people, the rest will follow. It doesn't matter where they come from, so long as once they get there they're competent. The fact that both Ellen Dunlap and Richard Wendorf have (from certain points of view within the profession) stunning deficiencies in their education has not stopped them from becoming superb heads of the institutions they run. And here's to it.

In short, our great problem is not one of technology, but of personnel.