

James Neal on the Challenges of Leadership

An *LA&M* Exclusive Interview

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Jim Neal is currently the vice president for Information Services and University Librarian at Columbia University, providing leadership for university academic computing and network services and a system of twenty-five libraries. He also works with the Electronic Publishing Initiative at Columbia (EPIC) and the Columbia Center for New Media Teaching and Learning (CCNMTL). Previously, he served as the dean of University Libraries at Indiana University and Johns Hopkins University and held administrative positions in the libraries at Penn State, Notre Dame, and the City University of New York.

Neal has served on the Council and Executive Board of the American Library Association (ALA), on the board and as president of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), and as chair of OCLC's Research Library Advisory Council. He currently is chair of the board of directors of the Research Libraries Group (RLG) and on the board of the National Information Standards Organization (NISO). He has served on the board of Project Muse, the electronic journal publishing program at Hopkins, on the advisory board for the E-History Book Project at the American Council of Learned Societies, on the advisory board of PubMed Central at the National Institutes of Health, on the Scholarly Communication Committees of ARL and ACRL, as chair of the Steering Committee of the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC), and currently serves on the board of the Columbia University Press. He has represented the American library community in testimony on copyright matters before Congressional committees and was an advisor to the U.S. delegation at the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) diplomatic conference on copyright. In 1997, he was selected Academic/Research Librarian of the Year by ALA's Association of College and Research Libraries.

Q: *What are some of your ideas about what leadership is; is it a skill, an aptitude, an attitude, or a behavior? Is it a science or an art?*

A: It is all of the above. Leadership is a concept that we have debated rigorously in our field for a very, very long time while trying to come to grips with effective management of our organizations in what we can clearly define as chaotic times. To me, leadership is best described in context of outcomes rather than inputs, in the sense that

leadership is evidenced by the ability of an individual to inspire an organization and its people to achieve its objectives, and to have an impact on its community.

Q: *What do you think are the responsibilities of a leader?*

A: A leader consults with those who work within an organization and those it serves to define a direction and agenda. A leader cheerleads in the sense of being responsible for the culture and vitality of the organization. A leader has responsibility to represent the organization effectively in a whole range of external venues—in my case on campus—but also in the higher education and scholarly information policy arenas. Also, a leader is an individual who can attract innovative people and provide the working environment for those individuals to thrive and grow individually and collaboratively to get things done.

Q: *When you spoke at the LAMA meeting at the 2004 ALA Annual Conference, the theme of your talk was "Everybody is a Leader, or Should Be." How so?*

A: Historically, we have depended upon hierarchical and bureaucratic structures to move problems, issues, and decisions through the organization. I think that is an ineffective and time-consuming model. It saps our agility and innovation. We invest enormously in the people who work in a library organization both in terms of the responsibilities that we assign to them and in their growth and development; yet we don't always provide them with the authority to make decisions and carry out their assignments effectively.

Q: *Do you think that leadership is something that can be taught?*

A: Leadership is a quality that can be drawn out. We tend to define leadership in very traditional ways and have not looked at the diversity of leadership styles. We often view it within the context of the charismatic individual and do not see the importance of the sometimes subtle leadership roles that individuals can play across an organization. Staff development and coaching programs are available to create opportunities for individuals to be much more aware

of their own qualities and capabilities. Many leadership development programs are too uniform, attempting to move everyone along one common path of leadership. We need to recognize different styles and diverse backgrounds.

Q: *How can we develop, attract, and obtain a high quality of workforce in this profession?*

A: Ours has historically been a second or third career choice. This means that we attract mature and experienced individuals. We have an increasing number of individuals within our organizations that have not been socialized through the traditional library education process. I call this the “feral” library professional, in the sense of being “raised by wolves.” And what does that mean for the culture of the library? First, we are hiring more and more people into traditional library positions who do not have the MLS as a credential. Second, an increasing number of professional positions in libraries are not librarians but human resource professionals, technology professionals, publishing professionals, and so on. So we are populating our organization with a much more diverse professional group. Third, a sizable group of people are getting their library degrees primarily through distance-learning programs. And fourth, there is the transfer of what were formerly professional responsibilities onto support staff and even student positions.

Q: *You have been dean or director of three research libraries. Tell me how those jobs differed. Have you changed your leadership style in response to the institutional culture of one library as opposed to another?*

A: Adaptability is critical. Librarians are at their best when they recognize the chameleon-like qualities that we need. My choice, if you will, of institutions was very much aimed at creating a diverse professional experience. Moving to Indiana, to a large, midwestern public university in a college town with libraries across eight campuses, called for a different set of leadership styles and roles, perhaps, because of the statewide breadth and the public nature of the university. Then, I made a move to a relatively small but research-intensive institution in an urban setting. It was a library struggling to define its future role from the midpoint in the ARL rankings, and I wanted to define new forms of excellence in that context. At both of these libraries, legacies of unique excellence needed to be sustained, but there were also enormous opportunities to advance in entrepreneurial ways.

Q: *Now in your current job you are responsible not only for libraries, but you are also chief information officer.*

A: In essence, yes. The one aspect of computing that I am not responsible for is administrative systems, but I do

have responsibility for the network, e-mail, and the Web, for example.

Q: *Still, that is a fairly unique model. How does it work? Do you ever have to wear two hats? Do you find yourself conflicting with yourself?*

A: I don't think it's so much an issue of conflict as how to allocate my time and energy across that set of responsibilities. It includes not only the library system, which is quite large and extensive, but also computing information systems, network services and communication services, an electronic publishing program, and the instructional technology group that works with the faculty to integrate technology into teaching and online courses. Over time, at least during the three years I have been here at Columbia, there has been much more of a convergence among those units in terms of the types of opportunities we pursue and the types of shared expertise that we need.

Q: *Do you think there is any fundamental difference between, let's say, a library leader and a leader in business or politics?*

A: I find that in the business community and in the political community there tends to be a pretty overt focus on charisma and even in the political sense, on a profit motive. I think the volatility of the business and political worlds touches what we do in higher education, but I don't think the centrality of profit is as relevant and effective within our working environments.

Q: *What are some of what you would think are enduring traditional values and qualities of leadership that are as relevant today as they were fifty years ago?*

A: There is a compassion that goes with quality leadership that transcends time and technology—compassion not only for those who work within an organization, but also for the communities that you serve; compassion that recognizes the needs and aspirations that individuals bring to their work experience and their information-seeking activities. I think collaboration is also a timeless value of leadership; the recognition that things get done through effective groupings and co-investment, and not through individual leadership. I find another timeless role that has played more powerfully in the last couple of years is that of leading the development of new resources. This is increasingly defined by resource attraction. Grantsmanship is a piece of it. New business development and entrepreneurial activities are part of it as well as leveraging assets and developing new markets for the information services that we can provide. These offer us arenas for research, development, and experimentation but also bring funds back in to the primary library services.

Q: *What do you think are some of the values and attributes that are required of leaders today uniquely, as opposed to fifty years ago, or even ten years ago?*

A: Although we continue to call ourselves “libraries,” we are much more seen, to our benefit, as agents of information access and innovation, which pushes us into an array of new community activities. Therefore, it is very important that today’s library leader be externally oriented. Historically, we were more internally oriented, much more hands-on, and involved almost to a fault. Today’s library leaders need to have confidence that they have built a solid organization coordinated and led by outstanding individuals who can and will work together. Today’s library leader also needs to embrace the political process more aggressively. We have tended as librarians to view politics as a necessary evil, but politics is the way things get done. This includes building relationships and alliances, defining positions, negotiating agreements, being agile, and working with others.

Q: *What do you think are the major issues librarians are going to have to deal with today and in the near future?*

A: The term I have begun to use is the *trompe l’Oeil* library. It’s a French term meaning “trick of the eye,” where someone has painted a scene on the side of a wall that gives the appearance that you’re looking at or into an actual building, but you are not. In some ways we have used that technique in current and future library development. We construct a library’s image around the traditional idea of the library as place, that the library gives patrons a certain warm and fuzzy feeling. Meanwhile, our services and activities are directed beyond the traditional framework.

One of the things I often say is that ambiguity is our friend. Our inability to sort things out and clearly pin things down is a great opportunity to experiment and innovate. One example is the continuing pressure we face from the information community to define guidelines for fair use of information in libraries. We should be very aggressively arguing against the adoption of guidelines, because we can find greater capability in the ambiguity of that environment. The technologies that underpin information creation or use are changing rapidly. Defining how we should behave according to a set of principles is inappropriate and unnecessary.

Q: *You know that the vested interests on the other side of that issue have a lot of money and influence. Can we prevail?*

A: We are beginning to see some new arguments in the information policy debates. The recent initiative in the National Institutes of Health (NIH) appropriations bill, which calls for open access to publicly funded research, is

an example of how the types of issues that we have been advancing are leading us into other information policy arenas. As we begin to see open access to publicly funded research, then the universities will perhaps begin to call for other research to be made similarly available. One of the things I am concerned about is that we as a library community have advanced open access, but we haven’t thought systematically about what would happen if it was achieved. What does it mean in context of the role of libraries, the nature of library work, and the funding of libraries?

Q: *In an article that you published in 1996, you made some predictions about what libraries would be like in 2000 and beyond.¹ Let’s revisit some of them. For example, one was that libraries would take over computer centers.*

A: I saw libraries taking on more responsibilities for academic computing, and I think that has happened dramatically. There has been an increasing role for libraries in instructional technology, as one example. Research technology is another. More of my colleagues in all types of library settings are responsible for heading campus programs for the application of technology to teaching and learning. In some cases it has organizational manifestations, as in my case, but in others it is much more of a fluid and flexible structure.

Q: *Another prediction is acquisitions budgets will quadruple.*

A: Acquisitions budgets have grown significantly over the last decade. While our funding has increased, our purchasing power during this time has been challenged substantially, and not just by the increasing prices, but also by the diversity of the content we need to make available to our communities. I think we are just now beginning to wrestle with the issue of whether we can continue to maintain both print and electronic versions of materials. As I also predicted, many libraries are operating with 20 to 30 percent of their acquisitions budgets invested in an electronic content. These factors clearly emphasize the degree to which the library industry has recognized the power of putting content in the hands of users where they want to be. I’ve written that “Quality Equals Content Plus Functionality.” The library community needs to recognize that it is not just putting information in front of people but also providing them with tools they need to exploit the information. Unfortunately, I also think that value is increasingly defined by content plus traffic. In an online world, we measure the number of hits on the Web site and make a lot more decisions on the basis of how frequently the materials are being used. For a research library that can lead to some very tough decisions.

Q: *You predicted less new library construction.*

A: I do believe that there has been a decline in new library construction. I think there has been a lot of focus on renovation and refurbishment of library space. It is common now to offload some collections into offsite facilities. Many of us have built or co-constructed shelving facilities where we can store some of those low-use, but still important research collections and convert or transform our library space on campus into new purposes. Today, library space is more of an intellectual space, a social space, and a community space. That transformation of the nature and purpose of library space is not something that we have fully appreciated and embraced.

Another prediction that more than fifty percent of reference transactions would take place over campus networks is proving correct. I think the ATM philosophy that we experience in our broader lives applies to all of the service environments in which we work. The notion of electronic reserves, chat reference, renewal of books, everything where we have a service relationship with the user is increasingly an online, user-driven activity.

Finally, one of the predictions that I made in 1996 was that academic libraries would become much more involved in government information policies issues. That certainly is true, particularly in the case of copyright and a whole array of laws, legislation, and court decisions that we have been party to on the issues around privacy, around intellectual freedom. All of these affect access and the functionality of our evolving services. Libraries more than ever are seen as central players in many of these national and international information policy debates.

Q: *Here's your chance to dust off that crystal ball again. Bring this to, let's say, 2010: What are we looking at? What are we facing? What are we doing?*

A: The nature of our collections will continue to be transformed. The trends that we are experiencing today will continue to move us toward a much more electronic content and service environment. More and more stuff that we acquire will be made available electronically. More and more of our historical content will either be made available by publishers or search engine vendors or through our own digital library programs. We have to be cognizant of the relationship between quantitative change and qualitative change. At what point do we reach true transformation? I often allude to Marxist theory of knowledge where he talks about a pot of water over a flame. Intellectually we know the temperature is increasing, but at some point it reaches a transformational point where the water turns from liquid to gas. At what point do we reach a similar transformational point of quantitative shift from print-based to electronic information and Web-based services? Also, the competitive environment, where libraries will work in the future, is something that we have not come to understand. There are continuing efforts by the information distributors and others to bypass libraries and to provide our communities with access to information in a market relationship with users. There are organizations and companies that have the ability perhaps to serve our users more effectively than we can, and the economics of that competition pushes us to the side.

Reference

1. James G. Neal, "Academic Libraries: 2000 and Beyond," *Library Journal* 121, no. 12 (July 1996): 74-76.

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I invite you to think about LAMA's future and what kinds of programs your professional association needs to have in place to meet your needs. There are many things LAMA could do to increase leadership skills in the library profession, so we will undoubtedly have difficult choices to

make. If we are to succeed in articulating our course to the future, we will need your input, advice, and leadership. I look forward to lots of conversations and e-mail exchanges with many of you!

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learning. Of the many staff development programs we offered during those years, it was the outdoor variety that best moved staff beyond personal and organizational limitations. With the library's top leader encouraging risk taking and experimentation—while expertly fending off those seek-

ing to keep the old ways—we were able to achieve major successes on behalf of the library's users."

I hope that you enjoy reading this issue of *LA&M* as much as Gregg and I enjoyed preparing it.