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Gregory A. Smith
Baptist Bible College

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Retooling the Profession:

Librarianship in an Era of Accountability and Competition

Gregory A. Smith
Associate Dean for Library Services & Institutional Research
Baptist Bible College
Springfield, Missouri

Librarianship has changed substantially in recent years. We who work in libraries must continually acquire new knowledge and skills. We must adapt to the reality that academic libraries, along with their parent institutions, face increased accountability. The functions that many of us have thought to be at the core of our profession are slipping from our grasp and will leave behind a mere managerial role. Nevertheless, many academic libraries will find a viable future by adopting and taking seriously the role of supporting learning. As we look at disruptive innovators in the information and learning scene, we should consider carefully whether to treat them as competitors or partners. Our libraries' prospects will be bright if we learn to analyze data, make evidence-based decisions, and communicate to our constituents the value that our libraries create. And while many emerging technologies vie for implementation, we must exercise Christian judgment regarding their ultimate value.

Good morning! I'd like to thank the conference planning committee for inviting me to address you today. I'm entering my 14th season of involvement with the Association of Christian Librarians (ACL). I first attended an ACL conference at Cedarville University in 1996, and I've managed to do so ten more times since then. To a large extent I have to give credit to ACL for influencing my professional development. Encouragement from fellow members has led me to publish articles and present workshops over the years. My book, *Christian Librarianship*, was conceived during a conversation at the 1999 conference. Networking through ACL helped me secure a job at Liberty University in 2003. And the care and concern of members has been the basis for some long-term friendships.

This morning I'd like to share seven propositions that summarize trends in, and prospects for the future of, librarianship – especially academic librarianship. The first of these propositions is fairly easy to appreciate.

#1: Change is a constant

What I mean by this is that librarianship has changed substantially over the past five years. I was told in graduate school that the "shelf life" of an MLS degree, without continuing professional development, was five years. With that in mind, I'd like us to take a look at some of the changes that have occurred in the world of libraries since mid-2004.

In June 2004 Amazon's Search Inside the Book™ feature was relatively new, having been introduced in October of the previous year. Five years ago we weren't experiencing overuse of Facebook™ in our libraries; in fact, in March 2004 that service had just expanded from its first campus, Harvard, to three additional campuses: Stanford, Columbia, and Yale. In April 2004 Wikipedia® had 250,000 English-language articles. The entry for Barack Obama consisted of three paragraphs and four links. In May of this year, Wikipedia® had 2.9 million English articles – an 11-fold increase over five years!

Google™ Scholar was released in beta in November 2004. It's still in beta, but that hasn't stopped it from playing an important role in research. The very next month we were treated to another surprise: the library digitization component of Google™ Books – known then as Google™ Print. Google™ Books is still in beta, too, but it has certainly begun to exert a lot of influence in the realm of library practice.[1]

The free version of Worldcat® was launched at worldcat.org in August 2006. I daresay that this service is used heavily by librarians as well as library users. Back in 2004 *kindle* was something you did to a fire. But on November 19, 2007, the Amazon Kindle™ device was made available for purchase in the United States, and has since garnered significant attention and market share in realm of e-books.

What about the bibliographic style manuals we were using five years ago? In 2004 the 6th edition of the *MLA Handbook* was new, having been published the year before. The 5th edition of the APA *Manual* first appeared in 2001; in case you hadn't heard, it's scheduled to be superseded by the 6th edition on July 1, 2009. In 2004 the 5th edition of Kate Turabian's *Manual* was already old, having been published in 1996. It was updated in 2007.

Five years ago the world was still spherical, ... everything wasn't miscellaneous, ... and the tail, though growing, couldn't be characterized as long – much less longer.[2]

#2: Never stop learning

My second proposition follows naturally from the first. If the environment that libraries operate in is changing rapidly, it's fair to say that those of us who work in libraries have to acquire new knowledge and skills in order

to keep pace with user expectations. We face a high learning curve as we seek to stay informed of new developments that impact professional practice. The situation is all the more challenging for those of us who work in smaller organizational contexts and thus have to cover a wide range of library functions.

As we discuss the need for librarians to engage in continuous learning, I'd like to refer you to an article by Kathryn Deiss that appeared in *Library Trends* in 2004. Deiss discussed differences between young and mature organizations, stating that "a young organization ... is likely to take more risks, experiment a good deal, play fast and loose with ideas, and worry much less about organizational structure, policies, and rules" (p. 23). She characterized libraries as organizations whose maturity can obstruct the process of innovation (pp. 23-24).

My curiosity about the process of innovation in libraries led me to survey the ACL membership last month. More than 100 members participated in the survey in response to two announcements sent to the ACL listserv. Reporting comprehensively on the data that I gathered would take all the time allotted for this address, so I'll just give you some highlights.[3]

The core of the survey asked participants to describe "the most significant change that you have adopted in your professional practice over the last year." Figure 1 portrays the frequency with which various categories of innovation were reported. With the exception of "Other" innovations that didn't match any of the categories provided, use of a new Web-based tool claimed the highest proportion of respondents (25%). The next most popular categories were use of a new piece of software (13%) and learning a new technique or function of software already in use (10%).

Analyzing results by respondent gender and age yielded some interesting insights. I found both similarities and differences between male and female respondents. Men and women were equally likely to report using a new Web-based tool; they were also equally likely to report a leadership or management innovation. However, women were more likely than men to cite a communication skills innovation. Men were more likely than women to describe their innovation using references to information technology (IT); specifically, they were more likely to cite a software-related innovation.

Age also influenced patterns of innovation, as shown in Figure 2. Respondents over 60 years of age reported lower levels of Web-based innovation than their peers 60 and younger.

Figure 1. **Types of Innovation: All Respondents**

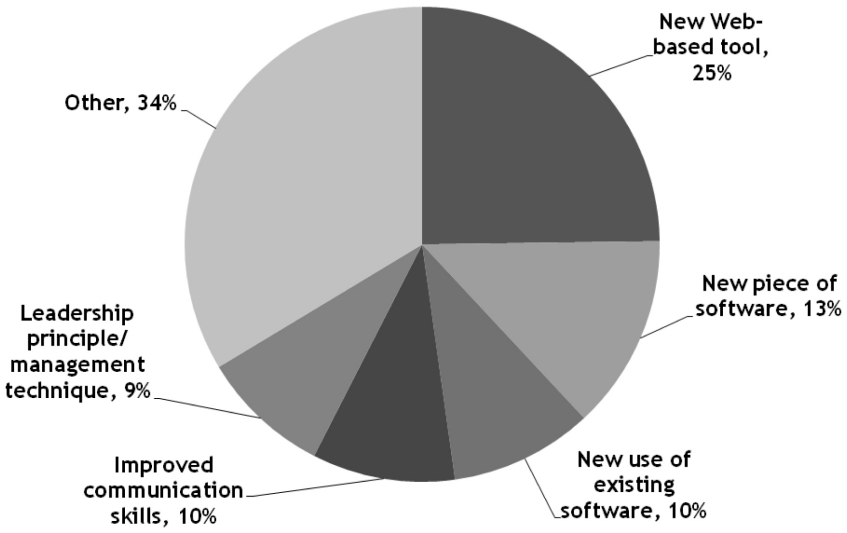
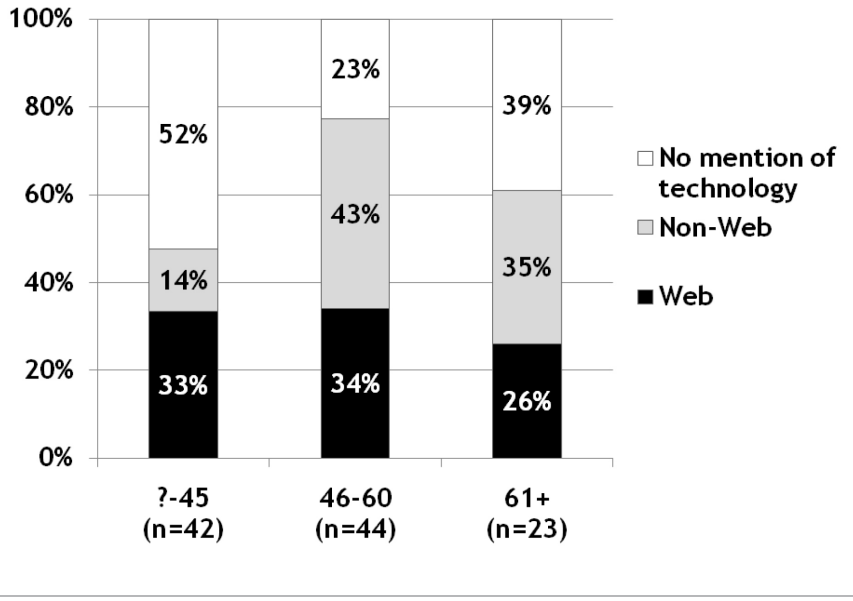


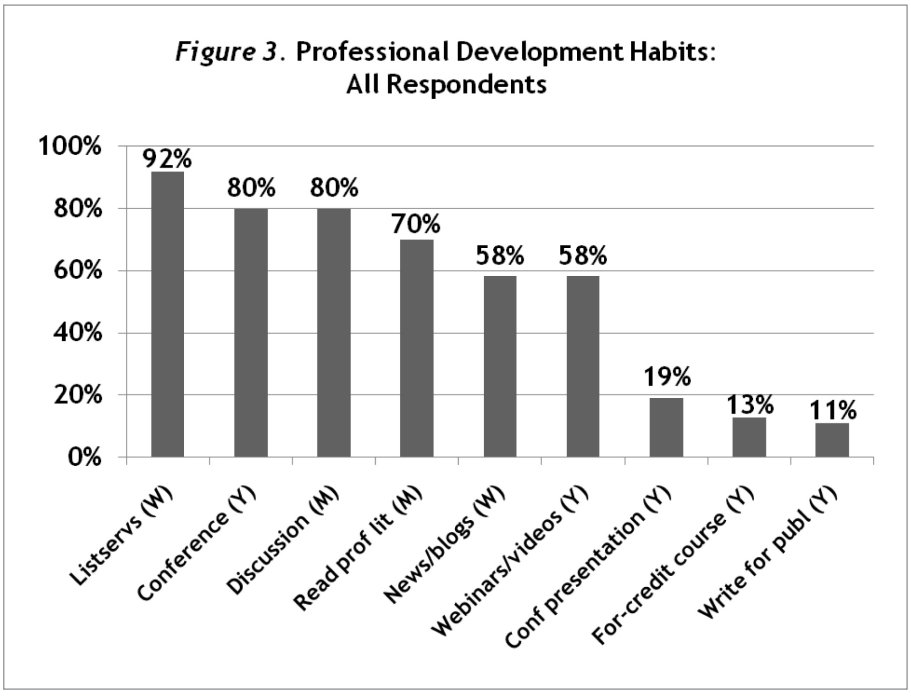
Figure 2. **Innovation & Technology: Age Bracket Comparison**



We face a high learning curve as we seek to stay informed of new developments that impact professional practice.

I was surprised by the fact that respondents 45 years old or younger described their innovation using fewer references to IT than respondents in the older age brackets. At least two factors may have contributed to this. First, younger respondents tended to be in the early stages of their careers, and several of them described an innovation that that had to do with adjusting to their organizational context. Second, younger respondents' versatility in the area of IT may have made them less conscious of the technological dimensions of innovation. Another noteworthy finding relative to age is that the middle bracket (respondents 46-60 years old) reported a high proportion of technology innovations that were not Web-based.

In the last portion of my survey I asked members to identify "habits ... you engage in so as to stimulate your professional growth." I supplied a list of nine common habits with corresponding frequencies (yearly, monthly, multiple times weekly) and asked respondents to mark those that they practiced. As shown in Figure 3, "reading listserv messages multiple times in a typical week" attracted the highest ranking (92%), with annual conference attendance and monthly informal discussions with colleagues tying for second place (80%).



Overall, nearly two-thirds (65%) of respondents reported that they engaged in four to six professional development habits on a regular basis. And three in five (61%) reported regular involvement in at least four of the following five key habits:

- Read listserv messages multiple times in a typical week
- Read news or blogs relevant to the profession multiple times in a typical week
- Discuss professional matters informally with colleagues at least once in a typical month
- Read work-related books or periodicals at least once in a typical month
- Attend a professional conference at least once in a typical year

Therefore, a majority of respondents engage in a regimen of professional development activities that entails a variety of frequencies and modalities.

To conclude my discussion of the imperative of continuous learning, I'd like to point out that change is difficult for all of us – perhaps more so for some than others. If you find yourself reluctant to change, I'd like to share with you an insight from a paper that I read over lunch not too long ago: "Now is the time to try something new." <*At this point in my address my slide show revealed that the "paper" in question was actually the message contained inside a fortune cookie that I ate recently. The audience laughed and I offered to share the lucky numbers printed on the opposite side of the paper.*>

#3: You're being watched

In stating this proposition I mean to say that academic libraries, along with their parent institutions and many other types of organizations, are facing increased accountability. Given my career trajectory, I've naturally grown in my awareness of the extent to which libraries' activities and expenditures are subject to scrutiny by institutional administrators, accrediting bodies, and other regulators. But as I prepared for this address, I wanted to make sure that my perception

wasn't just a matter of individual experience, so I conducted some literature reviews in a couple of databases pertinent to the library profession.

The first database that I searched was Library Literature & Information Science Full Text. Searching for all items other than book reviews, I used a combination of the following terms: <keyword> *libraries* AND <keyword> (*accountability* OR *accreditation* OR *assessment*). Figure 4 shows what I found, with results broken down into five-year increments from 1984 through 2008. The fact is that accountability-oriented terminology was used to describe recently published library literature nearly three times as frequently as it was applied to its corollary 20 years before.

I repeated a similar search strategy in WorldCat®, limiting results to English-language books not labeled as fiction or juvenile literature. I combined <subject term> *libraries* with <keyword> (*accountability* OR *accreditation* OR *assessment*). The results were not quite as pronounced as with the first database, but still showed an increase in the proportion of library literature described with accountability-oriented terms. By this measure, the prevalence of library accountability books has increased by 74% over a 20-year period (see Figure 5).

Given this backdrop, it should come as little surprise to us that one of the "Top Ten Assumptions for the Future of Academic Libraries and Librarians" published in *College & Research Libraries News* in 2007 had to do with accountability. Assumption number six on that list read as follows: "Higher education will increasingly view the institution as a business. Today, universities are extremely focused on fundraising and grant writing, maximizing revenue, reducing costs, and optimizing physical space. Do academic libraries have sufficient data to defend how their resources are allocated?" (Mullins, Allen, & Hufford, 2007). We may not like the notion of higher education being viewed as a business, but the fact remains that academic libraries compete for human, financial, and physical resources, and are expected to provide warrant for the initiatives and funding requests that they put forward.

Unfortunately, as Danny Wallace (2007) has noted, "The measures that have typically been employed to gauge library use are in question and no widely recognized substitute has appeared" (p. 529). In other words, at a time when our libraries are being watched more than ever, we can't seem to agree on what

***Figure 4*. Accountability Terms in Professional Literature: Items Listed in Library Literature & Information Science**

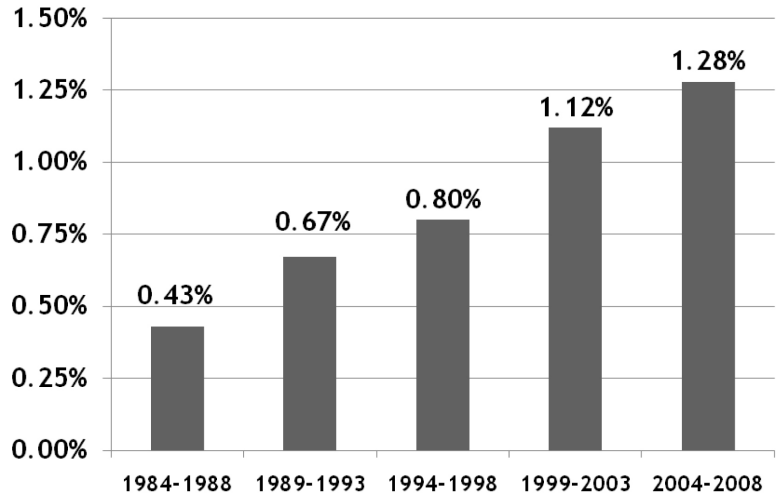
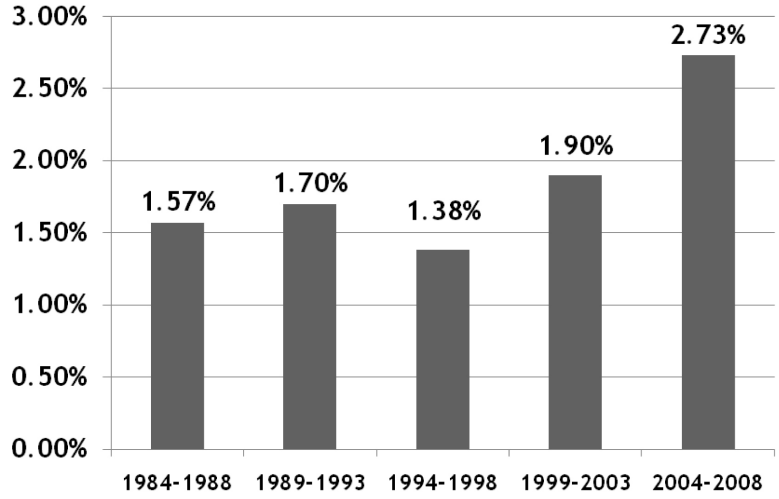


***Figure 5*. Accountability Terms in Professional Literature: English Books Cataloged in WorldCat®**



we should measure in order to ascertain the quantity and quality of a library's activities. I would add that the situation becomes even more complex when it comes to assessing the academic library's contribution to student learning. The data we have historically captured just don't tell us much.

#4: Management + Learning = Academic librarianship

Speaking of student learning, I believe that it is central to the future of academic librarianship. The other part of the functional equation is management. Allow me to explain what I mean. As little as five years ago, if you had asked me to map out the core functions of the library, I probably would have come up with answers such as these: collection and access management, reference services, resource description, access services, information literacy instruction, and information systems. What I have found is that these and other "library functions" are increasingly being performed by someone who is not a professional librarian employed at a local library. In some cases we have delegated such functions to paraprofessional staff; in many others we have outsourced our "core" to external organizations, whether for-profit or non-profit. I daresay that most of us are making fewer local collection development decisions now than we were five years ago; we've ceded a lot of that territory to the database aggregators. It's not unreasonable to conceive of a future where librarians at many academic institutions will have little direct, personal responsibility for functions that we once considered the core of our profession. Rather, we may find ourselves mediating information access by overseeing the work of paraprofessionals and managing contracts with external vendors.

The fact remains that academic libraries compete for human, financial, and physical resources, and are expected to provide warrant for the initiatives and funding requests that they put forward.

As I develop this proposition, it will be helpful for us to consider some relevant sources from the professional literature. Jerry Campbell's 2006 article, "Changing a Cultural Icon," is one of those sources. Perhaps you will recall Campbell's piece by one of the startling statements that he made: "Given the events of the past decade, academic librarians perhaps know better than anyone else that the institutions they manage – and their own roles – may face extinction over the next decade" (p. 28). He drew this conclusion because so much of academic library work has been assumed by agents other than local professionals. At this point we are about a third of our way into Campbell's decade of destiny.

Another article that expressed similar angst about the direction of the library profession was published in *American Libraries* the same year. In "The Crux of Our Crisis," Mulvaney and O'Connor (2006) lamented the erosion of the core functions of the library (and, consequently, of the core components of library science education). I don't really agree with their conclusion – that we must agree on a new set of library functions and teach them consistently in schools of library and information science. Instead, I believe that academic libraries in the future will be as diverse as the communities that they serve. I am hopeful that successful academic libraries will be united in one thing: the priority that they place on supporting learning on the part of students, faculty members, and other constituents.

As we consider the idea that academic libraries might adopt a more overt focus on learning in the near future, it's gratifying to be able to report that librarians currently or formerly associated with ACL have been very forward-thinking. In fact, in 1996, when the IT revolution was much less mature than it is today, library school professor Donald Davis Jr. stated his position that, whatever technological changes Christian college libraries might encounter, they should always seek to facilitate student learning.[4] A decade later, in direct response to Campbell's article, Steve Baker wrote an essay – as far as I know, never formally published – entitled "Sustaining the Cultural Icon through Purposeful Renewal" (2006). Baker argued that "the mission of the academic library is to facilitate engaged learning." More recently, Joseph McDonald (2007) articulated a similar line of thinking in a conference workshop presented at Calvin College.[5]

In summary, the functions that many of us have thought to be at the core of librarianship are slipping from our grasp and will leave

behind a mere managerial role. Nevertheless, many academic libraries will find a viable future by adopting and taking seriously the role of supporting learning. Because no two institutional communities are exactly alike, each academic library that adopts a learning-centered mission will engage in a blend of support activities that is at least somewhat unparallel to those assumed by other academic libraries. In other words, there will no standard set of academic library functions.

#5: Choose your enemies wisely

My fifth proposition is perhaps best introduced by the following video. *<At this point in the presentation I showed a YouTube™ video clip demonstrating the Espresso Book Machine™. According to the video, this device "can produce a library-quality paperback book in minutes with minimal human intervention" (On Demand Books, n.d.).>*

This machine changes the rules, doesn't it? For hundreds of years we've operated on the assumption that if people were going to choose from a collection of books, they had to go to a library that had acquired and organized copies of those books in advance. That assumption is now being challenged by a disruptive technology. The question is whether this innovation threatens or empowers libraries. As far as I know, only one library (at the University of Michigan) has actually acquired this device.[6] But what if costs came down and networked book-printing machines became commonplace?

It's not hard to think of other disruptive innovations that have burst onto the information and learning scene in recent years. Examples include Questia℠, Google™ Books, Google™ Scholar, Wikipedia®, Askville™, Yahoo!® Answers, LibraryThing, and even YouTube™ (as a reference tool). Each of these players upsets the status quo. Some may attract users away from libraries' resources, services, and facilities. (Is your reference collection used as much as it was ten years ago?) They may offer a resource or service of lesser quality than its counterpart in the library world, yet be more convenient, fun, or otherwise attractive to users. Some of them may require us to change the way we do things just to maintain a sense of currency with our users. So as we look at new players in "our" space, we need to consider carefully whether to treat them as competitors or partners.

#6 Where's the data?

Earlier I outlined my view that emergent academic librarianship entails two functions: managing the mediation of information access and providing learning support services tailored to the needs of our individual institutional communities. My sixth proposition is this: that academic librarians' managerial and educational roles can benefit from the collection and analysis of data.

I believe that academic libraries in the future will be as diverse as the communities that they serve.

About a year and half ago I came across a brief but fascinating Newsweek article entitled "Era of the Super-Cruncher" (Adler, 2007). Drawing from concepts in a book by Ian Ayres, this article discusses how data mining is transforming fields as diverse as journalism, criminal law, commerce, sports, and health care. The article describes "the replacement of expertise and intuition by objective, data-based decision making, made possible by a virtually inexhaustible supply of inexpensive information" (p. 42). I was particularly intrigued by Adler's quotation of Ayres on the use of data in medical practice: "'Many physicians have effectively ceded a large chunk of control of treatment choice to Super Crunchers,' he writes, and the trend will continue despite understandable resistance from the profession. No one wants to throw away a lifetime of specialized training and experience" (p. 42).

We academic librarians aren't particularly interested in hearing that our years of training and experience have somehow been made obsolete by the collection and analysis of data either, but I think we can already see trends to this effect. The application of data mining to librarianship certainly has the potential to remove the locus of decision-making from the domain of local libraries. But rather than focus on that, I'd like to discuss ways that we

can retool and use data locally to make better decisions than we would using intuition and anecdotal evidence.

The fact is that we are experiencing a happy confluence of automation, Web-based services, and powerful desktop data management tools. Each of these ingredients equips us to undertake in-house data mining. Our automation systems contain years of data that describe library activity (searching, circulation, etc.) in great detail. The Web-based services we have launched over the last decade or so typically maintain activity logs that can be mined as well (Goddard, 2007). Using commonly available office software, we can analyze data and identify patterns, ultimately enabling us to understand our users' needs more precisely. So, with this in mind, I'd like to share a couple of significant data analysis efforts that I've undertaken at libraries where I've worked in recent years.

Figure 6. Books & Media with Frequently Assigned Subject Headings: Percentage of Items Circulated

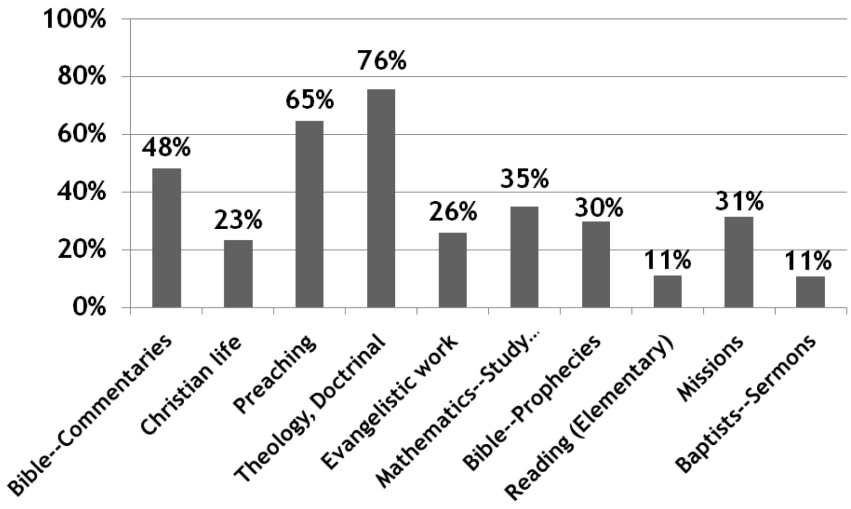
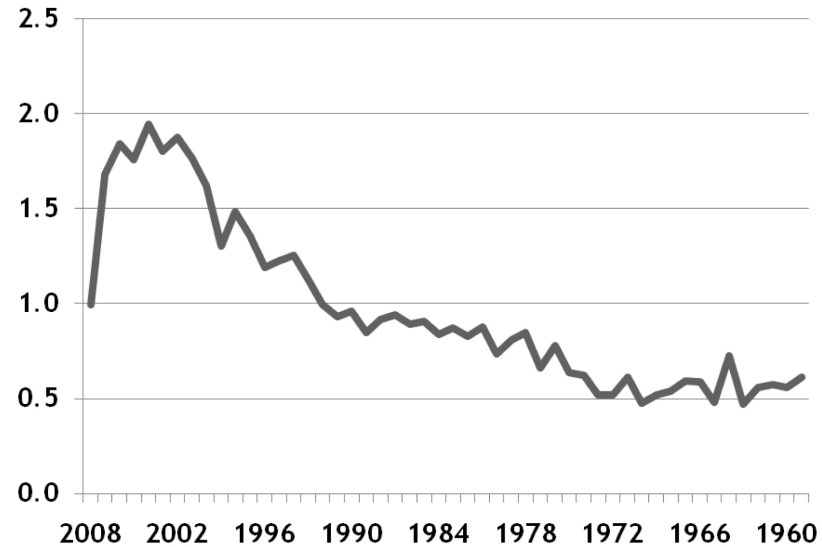


Figure 7. Use of Books & Media by Date of Publication



Last fall I undertook an analysis of the use of cataloged materials on the campus of Baptist Bible College (MO). The scope was the life of our automation system – between four and five years. Figure 6 displays the extent of circulation of materials with the most common Library of Congress subject headings used in our catalog. The data represented in this chart tell me that certain subject areas within my library's collection (e.g., "Christian life") are relatively overstocked. As a result, I may shift my acquisition priorities and/or engage in some targeted weeding efforts. Figure 7, also derived from this study, shows the average level of use of cataloged materials by date of publication. This graph gives me an idea of the extent to which my library's users prefer recently published sources over older ones. This kind of data has already informed decisions that I've made when processing donations of older materials.

The other major data analysis project that I'll reference had to do with interlibrary loan (ILL) borrowing at Liberty University. As you may have heard, Liberty has been on an aggressive growth trajectory for several years. What we found when I was there was that our student body was growing more rapidly than our library collection. As a result, our patrons were increasingly dependent on loans secured from other libraries via our ILL service. Over the course of a couple of years, we identified patterns in our ILL borrowing (journals from which we requested many articles, subject areas that were weak, authors whose works we needed to acquire more faithfully, titles of works needing additional copies, etc.). Translating these findings into collection

management decisions allowed us to achieve a drop in the ILL borrowing-to-lending ratio despite our enrollment growth.

The data that I've analyzed most have happened to be transactional – that is, records of user activity that, when viewed as a batch, can lead to insightful conclusions regarding a library's collections and services. But many other kinds of data can prove useful to library decision-making, and they're not all quantitative; they include surveys, focus groups, observation of user behavior, Web site navigation studies, catalog and database search log studies, and peer comparisons. Workshops presented at this week's conference have addressed at least four kinds of data-gathering: citation analysis, LibQUAL+® service assessment, measurement of reference activities, and assessment of information literacy. I think the prospects for our libraries will be bright if we learn to analyze data, make evidence-based decisions, and communicate to our constituents the value that our libraries create.

#7: Critique the technology

The impact of emerging information technologies on librarianship has been a recurring theme in this address. As I conclude, I'd like to encourage you to think critically – Christianly – about the numerous technological innovations that present themselves to you. Christian librarians need not feel compelled to implement every new technology that is touted as relevant to librarianship. I'm not trying to imply that most emerging technologies are intrinsically bad, but it is all too easy to make shortsighted choices in the name of innovation.

But where can one go to find Christian thought on information and communication technologies? I'm happy to report that I've developed a searchable, Web-based bibliography that addresses the connections between Christianity and libraries.[7] If we search that database for the string *technolog* digital*, we get more than a dozen results, most of which provide Christian interpretation of technologies that affect libraries.[8] Of course, you can also use this database to pursue the integration of faith and practice in many other areas of librarianship.

It's been a pleasure to speak to you today. As we conclude, I'll restate my seven propositions and then we'll take some time for comments and questions. Thank you for your attention.

1. Change is a constant
2. Never stop learning
3. You're being watched
4. Management + Learning = Academic librarianship
5. Choose your enemies wisely
6. Where's the data?
7. Critique the technology ✞

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ENDNOTES

1 When I visited Google™ Books in early July 2009, the beta label had been removed. The news media reported concurrently that Google™ had updated the status of several of its other services.

2 Of course, these are references to three influential books published in the last few years: Thomas Friedman's (2005) *The World Is Flat*, David Weinberger's (2007) *Everything Is Miscellaneous*, and Chris Anderson's (2006) *The Long Tail*.

3 Survey results reported here are those that were available several days before my conference address. I collected additional responses through mid-June. I expect to issue a more comprehensive report of survey results at a later date.

4 Toward the end of his article, Davis Jr. (1996) stated, "One could make a persuasive case that the college library, in addition to introducing to its constituents the communications configurations of the future, is ideally positioned to maintain and promote the integrative aspects of a holistic education that a liberal arts experience is designed to provide. ... My hunch is that we have allowed ourselves to be embarrassed, if not humiliated, in our pursuit of serious, integrated learning and we have embraced the electronic dream as a shield of relevance" (pp. 5-6).

5 McDonald also expounded on the centrality of learning to librarianship during a workshop presented at the 2009 ACL conference.

6 In the course of preparing this manuscript for publication, I discovered that Espresso Book Machines have already been deployed in at least four libraries of various types, in several university bookstores, and in other locations. Additional campus installations are planned for the summer of 2009.

7 The database is entitled "Christianity and Libraries: A Selective Bibliography." Available at http://www.citeulike.org/search/user/christian_librarian, it currently contains more than 475 entries that explore the connections between Christian faith and the information professions. For more information about the bibliography, see Smith (2009).

8 See, for example, Hill (1994), Dyer (1995), Groothuis (1998), Cox (2001), and Mash (2005).