

System Director's Report: May 2005

**“Five-eleven’s your height, one-ninety your weight, You cash in your chips around page eighty-eight.”
- The Harvard Lampoon, Bored of the Rings, New York, Penguin Books, 1993, p 57**

This is one of my favorite quotes, from one of my favorite books. Unfortunately (except for the weight part – I’m a lot chubbier) it may turn out to apply to me. A while back I was diagnosed with a type of leukemia. That’s probably why I tire easily and fall over a lot. Since this type of leukemia develops slowly, I may last for quite a few more chapters than the quote above implies. Nevertheless, it is time for a change.

It is therefore with great regret that I must announce my retirement, which will take place at about the end of the year (give or take a bit depending on the needs of the system and the will of the Board.) Above all else I want to say thanks. To everyone. The opportunity to work with the wonderful folks who make up our library community doesn’t come to everyone, and I have enjoyed all of it, the challenges as well as the successes. I don’t think I could have chosen anything I would rather have done with my life, and my only regret, in an era when we are always on the threshold of something new and wonderful, is that I don’t get to keep doing it longer.

That’s more than enough about me. Now I’d like to talk a bit about our little enterprise - where SCLS has been, where it is now, and where it is going.

When I started at SCLS, some 24 years ago, we were what I would call a first generation library system. By this I mean that we acted very much like just another local library, and we served the public directly. We operated a bookmobile in two (and briefly in three) of our four member counties, and we maintained collections ranging from best sellers, through art prints and 8mm movies, to a traveling exhibit of depression glass.

However, there were many who believed that the last thing South Central Wisconsin needed was yet another public library. Thus the first challenge I had to face as the Director of SCLS was a resolution on the floor of the Dane County Board of Supervisors to discontinue membership in SCLS and to start over from scratch.

To make a long story short, many people soon realized that SCLS’s proper customers were our member libraries, and that it was the function of those libraries to serve the general public directly. By embracing this new direction, we deflected the attempts to close us down and became a second generation library system. Our collection of depression glass was donated to the State Historical Society, and our bookmobile funding was redirected to the member libraries in the affected counties who actually provided most of the direct public service anyway. The focus of SCLS changed over to providing such services as continuing education, graphic arts and printing, several kinds of professional consultation, and a fairly primitive manual form of interlibrary loan as well as the van delivery required to support it. But there was still a problem. Although most of what we offered was appreciated by our members, nothing was really vital to their well being. And any agency which is not vital is, by definition, expendable.

The answer to this problem presented itself in the area of automation. Many of our member libraries had grown to such a size that they could no longer operate effectively without automating repetitive clerical tasks, and inventory management was swiftly becoming impossible without computer intervention. Unfortunately, not even Madison felt that they could afford to automate alone, and the will and the trust required for disparate municipalities to organize their own independent consortia simply didn’t exist in such a high risk environment as automation was in that day.

SCLS, however, was in the venture capital business. We could mediate the agreements, undertake the risk, and best of all, were willing to float a loan for the central equipment needed to get the project off the ground. Fortunately for my continued employment (and entirely due to the labors of more talented people than I can count) it all ultimately worked out. Resource sharing became fast and cheap, and the volume of resource sharing and delivery increased more than ten fold over the next decade or so.

There were several consequences to this process. First, SCLS became vital to the ongoing success of our member libraries. This ensured that we were likely to survive for a while. More importantly, however, although our member libraries still preserved their individual autonomy, governance, and sense of place, they began to look and feel to the public as if they were one huge library with a single collection. Shared automation brought easy access to masses of material to the customers of even the smallest library, and made expensive technical support services affordable for all. When our automated system became our chief gateway to the Internet, the shared resources of our members also became available to remote users, and could be accessed from the workplace, the school, and the home. This choice by our members to

behave as one institution for most practical purposes and to deliver their services beyond the walls of their institutions for the first time on a massive scale was something we had never really undertaken before. When we achieved it, we entered our third generation as a library system.

The great leap toward centralized sharing and remote access, however, was only the beginning. If our first generation was direct service to the public, our second was to focus on our members, and our third was to help knit everything together into one powerful service agency, then the obvious direction for our fourth generation was to connect our shared enterprise to the rest of the world.

The Internet was the key to this endeavor, and the state's TEACH program gave us access robust enough to make it all feasible. So far we have been able to put about 7,000 light reference books in electronic print format on the desks of even our smallest member libraries. Soon to follow are electronic audio books. First through our own contract, and now through the state's Badgerlink project, some 30,000 electronic full text magazines have been added to this total. We have also added several informational databases, covering subjects ranging from business reference through genealogy, to the mix, and more are under consideration all the time.

We also go far beyond the boundaries of our own public library system through participation in a 24/7/365 virtual reference cooperative which, at last count, was serving more than 33 million customers across the nation. Our recent shift to OCLC as our key long distance interlibrary loan provider has allowed us to access some 60 million titles and almost a billion holdings from all around the world.

Best of all, the vast majority of these new resources are also available to customers wherever they are, even in some cases if they seek their initial access to information through such mechanisms as Google or Yahoo, rather than through a library at all.

Despite these many wonderful developments, the door to our fourth generation as a public library system is just beginning to open. The library as a remote access point to a universe of information coupled with an increasing sense of the physical library as a vital center of the community, has caused usage of the services our members offer to increase to record levels, with no end in sight.

Over the years we have faced many challenges and come far. But we still have far to go. If SCLS is to fully develop as a fourth generation public library system, and to prepare itself to move on to whatever comes next, we must remain flexible, willing to part with the old and undertake the new, and accepting of risk at levels the individual members cannot. We must remain focused on the needs of the members and the public they serve. We must strive to understand a rapidly changing environment, and be willing to move swiftly in new directions we haven't even begun to dream of yet, in order to prosper in the future.

It has been my honor to have worked with the SCLS trustees, staff, and members for 24 years now. You are up to the task. I wish you all the best for the future. It's been a great ride.