The Changing Nature of Higher Education

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Hello, my name is Manuel T. Pacheco, and I am the president of a medieval institution. I mean no insult to the University of Missouri, where I work. Nor to the hundreds of colleges and universities around the nation that are also medieval institutions. The fact is, in ways both visible and hidden, higher education still bears a strong resemblance to the institutions created by our monkish ancestors.

We see it, obviously, in the titles, the ceremonial robes, and the architecture around our campuses. And all those things serve as good reminders of days when knowledge was closely held, protected by a few, and imparted to a few more. The walls of the college truly once were a barrier; phrases such as “the gates of knowledge” really used to mean something. This was not an entirely negative connotation, at least in the sense that it helped define the university as a community, but it ceased to be a viable world view a long time ago.

Yet somehow, aspects of this cloistered life survived not only Gutenberg but also Mr. Rogers; not only moveable type but also television. Despite the 20th-century growth of satellite campuses, satellite courses, and extension and outreach services, we remain too inaccessible to many of our citizens. And this is at a time when access to virtually any kind of information seems to be readily available in the rest of the marketplace. The more the information age advances, the more we struggle to keep up.

To be certain, we are trying to do better, and succeeding in many ways. Today, a student sitting at home in Columbia, Missouri, can browse through library holdings in Columbus, Ohio. Not only books and journals but archival collections are increasingly becoming available to everyone with Internet access. No parts of the university community can remain cloistered in the medieval sinecure, no matter how hard some of them still try.

And while there is much to be praised in that development, cause for concern exists as well. A fair example comes from our colleagues in journalism. Some say that the Internet can make anybody—even, say, Matt Drudge—a journalist, because it creates instantaneous, inexpensive access to a worldwide marketplace of ideas. Others remark that a modem, or for that matter, a printing press, doesn’t make someone a journalist, and that skills, experience, and an ethical orientation are more important.

What makes a person a librarian? Certainly, not the Internet. It is simply the last in a long line of technical innovations that have made life at college libraries both easier and more challenging. Placing a list of holdings online no more makes a library than did converting old
card files to digital databases. Librarians are, I think, the last to confuse their tools with their task. Books and computers are their tools; their task is to make knowledge available to everyone.

Knowledge is not the same thing as information, any more than Matt Drudge is the same journalist as Walter Cronkite. And therein lies the challenge I mentioned. If a new, digital age is simply about the dissemination of information, then we don’t need to ask much of our librarians. Technicians would do nicely in that case. The search for knowledge would be, as they say in the computer industry, “plug and play.” This attitude can be found among intelligent, well-meaning people who believe if we can just find the money for the equipment, if we can just stretch enough cable across the planet, we can tear down the medieval walls once and for all.

But as anyone who has ever set up a home computer can tell you, the world definitely is not in a “plug and play” mode. And the problems with hardware and software pale in comparison with the big questions about how we learn, how we want to learn, how we live, and how we want to live.

In our time, information has become a global commodity, as our society shifts from a manufacturing-based to information-based economy. Not all commodities are the same, of course. In the financial world, brokerage houses may deal with everything from junk bonds to Microsoft stock. On the Internet, consumers might choose to visit the Big Ten libraries, or head for a web site dedicated to denying that the Holocaust occurred. Everyone has an equal right to disseminate information, but all information is not created equal. This has led to some difficult problems that everyone here is already familiar with—such as whether public libraries should, for instance, block access to Internet pornography—but I believe more difficult and significant questions lie ahead. I will pose two of them to you today.

First, we must decide how we want to learn in an age of digital information. I am not a critic of distance learning. I believe that courses can be greatly enhanced through the use of web pages. And it is clear that the ability to access libraries and archives across the world is one of the greatest advancements in the history of scholarship. But as many critics of the information age have noted, the advent of personal computers, servers, and networks has raised some disturbing questions about access to education. The enormous outlays required to build and maintain information technology systems concern all of us who are required to sign off on such budgets. Imagine how much worse it is, as parents and employers become increasingly enamored of computer skills, for those who have no such resources. I suspect that some of you in this room don’t have to imagine that situation.

It might be more intriguing to turn this problem on its head. It might seem counterintuitive, but the future problems relating to access and technology might be exactly the opposite of what we expect. Instead of poorer students and schools finding themselves left behind in the computer revolution, we might see, in twenty or thirty years, a different type of two-tier system: The wealthier among us would be able to serve our students with real, human teachers, librarians, and other staff, who have their expensive salaries and health benefits. The less-fortunate would enjoy the benefits of a “virtual” education from a “distance.”

This might sound improbable, even blasphemous, given the cachet information technology has in our society. But television once had the same kind of excitement surrounding it, too. And imagine if, twenty-five years ago, you had told someone that they would deposit and withdraw money with the aid of a computer instead of a living bank teller. What might have seemed like a futuristic luxury is a source of irritation, once it is realized, for a lot of people. The cost of computing power always goes down, and the cost of staff and faculty and physical plant always goes up. Do you have any doubt which students would really prefer, given the choice between interaction with real, knowledgeable people and the digital byproducts of real, knowledgeable people? Or will we confuse tools with tasks?

The second question is closely related to the first: How do we want to live in an information age? Again, I want to praise all the wonders of our computing systems, our satellite uplinks, and our Internet servers. They are wonderful accessories, and I can’t imagine doing without them. But as more talk emerges of a “virtual campus” with “virtual libraries,” one does not have to be a Luddite to ask why we would settle for living vicariously through our equipment.

Some tell us that we should look to industry for guidance on this question—that the marketplace has shown higher education the way with its use of telecommunications equipment. I agree that industry often can teach us a thing or two, although I believe just as
often it is the other way around. But when we do look for answers from industry, we sometimes learn things we already suspected. For example, Sprint Corporation, the communications giant whose Kansas City-area headquarters is scattered among nearly sixty buildings, is now creating a new headquarters on a 200-acre site at a cost of $700 million. The new complex will have offices, meeting rooms, businesses, and athletic fields. They even call it a campus. When a vice president of the company was asked what motivated the consolidation, he remarked on how great it would be to meet and talk face to face with his colleagues for a change.

Businesses will do what they deem right for themselves. Colleges and universities have to do the same. How do we want to live and learn? We will answer this question differently depending on the situation at hand. We will make mistakes along the way; we already have made some we don’t know about yet. No one is really poised to deal with this question in a comprehensive manner, but everyone is trying.

Still, no one group in higher education has better experience or a more informed viewpoint than our librarians. They have long known that they could not equate excellence with the number of volumes on their shelves, but that the essential measure is the ability to readily identify and acquire information that the user needs, wherever it is located. They know the power that new tools have given researchers and students, but they also know that no computer can replace the human skills required to use those tools wisely.

We have politicians to regulate the Internet, or at least argue about it. We have attorneys to debate intellectual property rights. We have college presidents to worry about the expense. We can count on students and faculty to tell us what we’re doing wrong and what we could change to make life better for them.

But few social institutions are better equipped than libraries to confront the changes brought on by the rapid evolution of information technology. As a matter of fact, librarians were dealing with this challenge before many of us used the term “information technology.” As you continue to deal with it, I urge you—and everyone else in higher education—to keep these factors in mind:

- Again: Our society is moving from manufacturing to information as its economic basis. The skills needed for sustained employment prove not only to be new but also to change constantly. We must not only understand the need to retrain today’s workers, but to adjust to the fact that today’s students will be life-long learners. What is vitally important today will be obsolete tomorrow.

- The people we serve live in an internationalized marketplace in which national and regional boundaries are coming to mean less and less. We are used to issues of free trade in goods and services, but we have only begun to confront the difficulties of free trade regarding the knowledge business.

- Individuals must make their way in a world of increasingly diverse communities in which massive historical forces have created unparalleled mixtures of race, religion, language, and cultural inheritance. We do not live in what some historians have termed an “age of consensus.” We must be ready to adapt to the educational needs of a truly multicultural clientele. We will face barriers of language and custom, but we will be hindered most of all to the extent that we are unwilling to understand and embrace differences.

Any library system that does not recognize the reality of these truths is doomed to failure. Any library system that does not recognize the inherent implications will be ineffective at best and irrelevant at worst. You may stack your computers a mile high, but they will not help you deal with the real consequences of change in our society.

What will help you are the skills that librarians have always brought to their work. In any age, you have shared the responsibility for helping the volumes on your shelves speak to the inner heart of each student. Each of you, in your individual work, resonates through the institutions and the societies you serve.

In an information age—one in which an endless array of words and thoughts are available at the touch of a finger, with seemingly no help from anyone else—we need the guidance of our librarians more than ever. That is not the conventional wisdom, but it should be. When knowledge was jealously held and hesitantly shared, only a few stewards were required. Now, with the explosion of information technology, we require more good stewardship than ever. For as we tear down the old barriers to knowledge, we must ensure that we are not simply putting up fancy new ones.