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# Mayflower: Ode to New Beginnings — A New Column for New Times with a Positive Mission

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# Mayflower: Ode to New Beginnings — A New Column for New Times with a Positive Mission

Column Editor: **Antje Mays** (Director of Collections, University of Kentucky Libraries) <antjemays@uky.edu>

**Column Editor's Note:** *Welcome to this new column on positive strategies for library futures! This column is a call for librarians to stop internalizing negative pronouncements purporting to prove libraries' trending toward irrelevant skillsets, obsolescence, and demise. This column offers a positive counter-voice in pursuit of a dignified self-image for the library profession, which, after all, has been a superb steward and community connector.*

*The inspiration for this new column sprang from the stream from fearful expressions about existential pressures within the library profession. Articles emphasizing library defunding, layoffs, and outright closures, along with studies on the waning usefulness of libraries based on flawed quantifiables have fueled fear and dissatisfaction in the library profession.*

*The first article in this column frames library pressures in a context of broader trends, examines professional stewardship and the library profession's enduring value, and portrays the wide range of skill and knowledge areas to which libraries are natural contributors. — AM*

## Winter is Coming: Post-Growth, No-Growth, and Existential Value Judgments

The 2018 Charleston Conference theme of “*Oh, Wind, if winter comes, can Spring be far behind?*” (Charleston Library Conference, 2018) reflects today's harsh winds of no-growth environments and ponders prospects for revitalization. The theme is from Percy Bysshe Shelley's (1820) poem “Ode to the West Wind” which ponders both the annihilating and cleansing power of autumn's sweeping westerly storms ushering in the night of winter and concludes with an expression of hope for regeneration in the following spring. Editors **Drabble, Stringer**, and **Hahn** (2007) declare the poem's “total effect [as] one of transcendent hope and energy, achieved through suffering and despair.” Similarly, the **American Economic Association's** (AEA) unofficial 2016 conference theme of “Winter is Coming” is drawn from **Gregory Clark's** keynote presentation titled “Winter Is Coming: **Robert Gordon** and the Future of Economic Growth” (Clark, 2016). Going even further than **Gordon** (2016), the pessimism in **Clark's** (2016) central premise is rooted in his view that growth and widespread transformation in the U.S. economy have run their course. **Clark** argues that technological impacts prevail mostly in high-end niche markets whilst the broader economy declines toward a medieval economy, ca. 1300 A.D., anchored by cooking, serving, and cleaning work in which technological transformation

is irrelevant. Economics correspondent **Paul Solman's** (2016) interview during the AEA conference uncovered that the dark economic symbolism of “Winter is Coming” was named after an episode of *Game of Thrones*, whose zero-sum fictional premise struck the keynote speaker as a fitting analogy to the stagnation he sees in the U.S. economy.

Libraries and higher education feel the effects of this stagnation in form of flat or declining budgets triggered by the 2008 financial crash, subsequent recession, and eventual recovery unaccompanied by restored funding levels (Clark & Brandon, 2009; Domonell, 2011; Douglass, 2010; Hebel, 2010; Lewin, 2011; Maatta, 2011; Rosa, 2018). Libraries and their functional infrastructures are portrayed in the spirit of **Baumol's** (2012) cost disease: Rates continue to rise in uniquely high-skilled service fields where the human touch remains central and high-level expertise is at a premium. **Archibald and Feldman** (2010) examine underlying factors of rising costs of college attendance and identifies high-skilled expert labor and library infrastructures among higher education's cost ingredients. **Cappelli** (2011) laments widespread unwillingness among business and institutions to invest in education and training infrastructures; the costs of attending public universities are increasingly shifting from states to students (Domonell, 2011; Lewin, 2011), spurring debate on the economic returns on college attainment (Cappelli, 2015). An **OECD** study on skill development in the United States notes rising costs, reduced institutional funding, and growing indebtedness among students attempting to self-fund their educations (Kuczera & Field, 2013).

In the library world, this economic context translates into cuts in pay and jobs (Maatta, 2009) as well as largely flat budgets (Rosa, 2018), contributing to difficulties in retaining top performers (Wolff-Eisenberg, 2016). At the same time, libraries are tasked with ever-expanding ranges and quantities of services (Horrigan, 2015). Libraries fall prey to low-value judgments from academic administrators where value measurements rely solely on methods borrowed from business: Library outputs as returns on investment calculated solely on financial accounting measures of income and cost of production fall short of fully capturing libraries' impact and value to their users' professional and academic success (King & Tenopir, 2013; Tenopir, 2010; Wolff-Eisenberg, 2016).

### Impact and Existential Value Judgment: How Do Professions Deserve To Exist?

**Part A: Financial industry – poor judgment and global economic consequences:** Seeking growth in investment returns, the

financial sector facilitated increasingly exotic investment instruments derived from securitized subprime loans, then found itself unprepared for the resulting financial collapse which ushered in the deepest recession since the Great Depression of the 1930s (Bierman, 2010). Mainstream thinkers were wedded to the notion of ever-rising asset values and stable returns (Hartcher, 2006) and viewed collapse in housing and debt markets as improbable (Taleb, 2007; Taylor & Williams, 2008). The financial crash of 2008 and the recession it triggered took the prevailing school of financial thought by surprise (Bayoumi, 2017; Palley, 2012).

Yet despite the economic devastation triggered by blind spots and poor judgment in the financial professions, no one, including finance practitioners, declared the financial industry unworthy of further existence. Rather, business and finance worldwide took aim at business ethics, core values, and placed intentional emphasis on ethics in business education programs. Rather than aiming to self-destruct, business and finance sought to self-correct (Aydin, 2011; Buchko & Buchko, 2009; Catacutan, 2013 Galagan, 2009; Oates & Dias, 2016; Sigurjonsson et al, 2015; VanHise et al, 2013).

**Part B: Library profession – trusted brand of enduring value:** The library profession is trusted for providing vital information, instruction, and services to wide user populations aiming to read, learn, upgrade their skills, and educate children. Public library users continue to value these library services (Horrigan, 2016; 2015). The State Library of Maine's recent survey of trustworthiness and ethical standards across professions found librarians ranking highly among the most trusted professions — second only to nurses. Specifically: (1) Nurses took first place, with 81% of respondents expressing high/very high confidence in the nursing profession's trustworthiness. (2) Librarians came in second, at 78%; (3) pharmacists, 74%; (4) medical doctors, 68%; (5) high school teachers, 59%; (6) police officers, 59%; (7) clergy, 54%; (8) funeral directors, 44%; and (9) accountants, 43% (Lockwood & Ritter, 2016). The **Pew Research Center** found that Americans, especially millennials, see libraries as sources of trustworthy information, indicating new generations placing value on libraries (Geiger, 2017). A similar poll in Great Britain also ranked librarians among the professionals most likely to provide trustworthy information (CILIP, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). In academic settings, library resources and services enhance researchers' productivity, grant-writing success, professional growth, and academic success (King & Tenopir, 2013; Tenopir, 2010).

*continued on page 00*

**Key knowledge needs and the library profession as strategic partner:** Numerous studies across the fields of business, economics, education, and the military identify several key skill and talent shortages that harm organizational functioning, economic strength, and national security (Klein, Rice, & Levy, 2012; Manpower Group, 2012, 2013; Onsomu et al, 2010; *Our Troubled Education System*, 2012; Preston, 2010; Schwab & Sala-i-Martin, 2012, 2013; Wagner, 2010).

Key hard skills found lacking across student bodies and the workforce comprise content knowledge, technical skills, and industry-specific competencies. Hard skills include basic skills, literacy, numeracy including mathematical reasoning and applied measurement, academic foundations and subject mastery, and the skill of practical application of knowledge in real-world work settings. Soft skills in the analytical realm encompass oral and written communication skills, information literacy characterized by ability to locate, organize, and evaluate information from multiple sources, scientific literacy, critical thinking, analysis and synthesis, interdisciplinary thinking, problem-solving and decision-making skills, innovation, creativity, global awareness, cultural intelligence, and engaged citizenship. Values-centric soft skills include ethics and character, professionalism, work ethic and motivation, initiative, flexibility, social skills and business etiquette, self-awareness, collaboration and teamwork, leadership skills, intellectual curiosity, and commitment to continuous skill development (*Closing the Gap*, 2012; *Critical Skills Survey*, 2010, 2012; Gerver & Robinson, 2010; Hart Research Associates, 2010; Hirsch, 1988, 2007; Hofmann, 2008; Jacobs, 2011; Kuczera & Field, 2013; Nagle, 2010; OECD, 2012; Pohl, 2000; Plum et al, 2008; SHRM, 2008; Suárez-Orozco, 2007; Thornburg, 2002; Wagner, 2012).

These key skill families are a natural outgrowth of libraries' instruction in research-pertinent skills in information technologies, critical evaluation of information, reflection upon purpose-appropriateness of findings, and practical application of knowledge uncovered through research. The library profession can and should take a page from the business playbook and inject its expertise into the wider community — a topic covered further in the next article.

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- Invitation to authors:** *In light of libraries' strategic strengths, why does the library profession denigrate itself? Many of the above skill families globally deemed in short supply fall within libraries' roles of information expertise. Come join this gathering place around library strategies for positive futures!*
- This column invites you to submit research articles, case studies, and how-we-did-it articles. Article submissions are welcome in a wide range of topics including strategic partnerships and outreach, collaborations, sharing expertise in and beyond our profession, getting out into the broader community to share our information savvy, as well as specific examples of successful library strategies with positive outcomes.*