LIBRARY NEXT

SEVEN ACTION STEPS *for* REINVENTION

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Catherine Murray-Rust retired in August 2020 as the dean of libraries at the Georgia Institute of Technology. For more than forty years she has been a change agent, reimagining library services and collections to meet the needs of the community. Now she focuses on telling encouraging stories and offering practical advice about how to help libraries thrive in the future.

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Preface

> Writing a book, just like building a library, is an act of defiance. It is a declaration that you believe in the persistence of memory.
>
> —Susan Orlean, *The Library Book*

While I was writing this book, COVID-19 turned our world upside down. At the time, I was at my daughter's home in Virginia helping take care of her newborn daughter and trying to keep up with news from Georgia Tech and libraries around the country. I stayed home as the e-mails flowed in from colleagues who were all struggling to do the right thing for their employees, colleagues, and communities. When I learned about how long the virus survives on plastic and cardboard, and the recommendations for all of us to keep at least six feet apart and wear a mask, I could no longer insist that libraries are safe havens. For the first time in my career, I recommended closing all physical library locations indefinitely and not allowing borrowing.

Life during the pandemic is teaching us important lessons about community, equity, and inclusion. We all need to become better at planning for all kinds of futures, the ones we like and the ones we would rather not have to face. We all need to be in touch with every segment of our community, not just those with the most resources or the loudest voices. We all need to be continuously focused on fulfilling the aspirations of the individuals and groups we serve. We all need to constantly work to make our collections and services equitably available by securing infrastructure and financial support for our communities as well as our libraries. We all need to keep engaging others while growing ourselves.

For more than forty years, I have worked to ensure that our libraries and our profession thrive. I often challenge other library leaders about what they

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are doing to positively impact library services today and in the years ahead. Many sorrowfully tell me that their spaces are shrinking, and their budgets are stagnant. Like me, they reject the call to stop using the word library because it is too old-fashioned to garner funding and public support. Some bemoan how hard it is to deal with rapid change. Others want help in creating a positive future and they want it now.

In my presentations and writing, I plead for librarians to focus on delivering digital services at scale and viewing the library's online presence as its primary, not secondary, service. Now, with all the pandemic-imposed changes, I take no pleasure in being right. I have no wish to yell, "I told you so." I hate the fact that a virus has scared us all into paying attention. I wish we and our institutions were better prepared to deliver content and services efficiently and effectively online. I wish every household in the country had affordable internet access for learning as well as entertainment. I wish our websites were beautiful, functional portals to all the library has to offer to everyone in the community.

I am writing this book to help all of us who value libraries to face squarely and come to terms with our uncertain future. We all suspect that hoping for the best, while planning for the worst, will not work. Deep down, we know that our fate is in our own hands. Waiting patiently and quietly to be appreciated and funded is not likely in this hyper-competitive world. We are committed to offering information expertise, innovative services, high-quality content, and inspirational facilities, but we lack resources. We struggle to replace the stereotype of shushing librarians protecting their books with one of outgoing library employees engaged with their communities and actively promoting their patrons' aspirations. We fear we do not have the skills to achieve intense cultural change, attract outstanding employees and partners, and encourage the bold ideas required for success.

Based on the lessons I learned during my years as a self-described library disrupter, in this book I offer you action steps to navigate these rapidly changing times and prepare for a brighter future. I encourage you to explore, share, practice, apply, and evaluate strategies and solutions that are compatible with your leadership style and are effective in your organizational environment. By reading my library work-life stories, especially tales from the twelve years I spent on the transformation of the Georgia Tech Library, and by applying my recommended takeaways to your work, you will strengthen your leadership qualities and strategic skills—courage, integrity, empathy, collegiality, and kindness.

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Why Turn Yourself and Your Library toward Your Community?

> I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community, and as long as I live it is my privilege to do for it what I can.
>
> —George Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman*

In preparation for an annual leadership retreat, my boss at the Georgia Institute of Technology asked another dean on campus and me to write a case study about the library's transformation, for discussion by a cohort of faculty members who were on a fast track to becoming deans and provosts. We carefully prepared our presentation and questions, but the retreat was canceled because of a campus tragedy two days before it was to take place. When we finally made our presentation several months later, the faculty engagement discussion was replaced by a short presentation plus a question-and-answer session. It did not go well.

At the time, many of the faculty participants were heavily involved in their own campus issues and had no time or interest to spare on the library's ambitious renovation project. Annoyance and irritation were everywhere in the room. When we got to question time, one engineering faculty member looked me in the eye defiantly and declared that he really did not see the point of spending all this time and money on the library when he never used it and didn't know anyone who did.

After pausing for a minute so I would not say something I would truly regret, I asked, "So, you don't use IEEE, Science Direct, Web of Science, or any of the other engineering publications?"

"Of course I do," he said, looking offended, "but I get them from Google."

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"And how," I asked, "do you think they get to Google, since we pay millions on your behalf every year for subscriptions?"

"Oh," he said, looking a little less belligerent but not contrite. "You guys do that?"

This conversation did not surprise me. I had been having similar ones for years. It reminded me once again that as hard as my colleagues and I try to involve the campus community in the transformation of the library, we make little progress. We are grateful that there is minimal hostility to the changes we are making, but we're chagrined that the usual reaction is indifference. We constantly repeat our slogans about the library offering inspirational digital and physical spaces, curated scholarly content, information expertise, and outstanding services, but we have mixed results in engaging the campus.

I was slow to realize that we are making minimal progress getting people excited about our dreams for the future, because they are just that—our dreams for the future, not theirs. Our aspirations still are not deeply rooted in the community's aspirations. Our rhetoric is still too often about what we want for the community, not what the community wants for itself. Although we convinced the university to invest almost $120 million on the renovation of two campus library buildings and the construction of the Library Service Center (LSC) to house a shared collection with Emory University, we still have not captured the campus's imagination about the enhanced impact the library could have in the future. The library's long history of staying turned inward, relying on its own assessment of the needs of the community, and expecting users to come to it is hard to change. We have a long way to go before the library is a trusted, equal partner in helping the campus community achieve its aspirations.

If you are reading this, I assume you are curious about whether my stories and advice can help you and your library. You may work in a university or a city that invests heavily in its library. You may be part of a library that is a valued, integral part of the community. Your library buildings may be beautiful safe havens for people. You may have collections that meet the needs of children, seniors, and everyone in-between. If so, consider yourself fortunate; you have probably implemented several of the action steps in this book already. If not, I have some recommendations and suggestions for you.

But before we get to specifics, I strongly urge you and your colleagues to feel a sense of urgency about initiating change. The pandemic, racial injustice,

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violence, and all the other societal traumas we are experiencing have intensified the need for libraries at a time when our future is at risk. Some libraries are growing, and many are surviving, but few are thriving. When that fast-track faculty member or up-and-coming politician who never uses the library and doesn't know anyone who does becomes a university president or a mayor, we are usually in deep trouble. If we are lucky, they hear from community activists who will stand up for us. But without funding and political support, we will become increasingly marginalized and irrelevant. Failing to live up to the values we profess in the ALA Code of Ethics and the Library Bill of Rights will be obvious only to ourselves. Our communities will eventually abandon us in favor of individuals and organizations that deliver what they need.

To avoid this bleak future, we will have a better chance at a bright tomorrow if we turn our library from a "fortress" existing apart from the community to a "platform" for learning and discovery, both online and in person. You may be offended at my calling your library a "fortress." You may be wondering what "turning toward the community" really means. You may ask why it's not sufficient to do what we have always done, only better. You may disagree with my contention that libraries are vulnerable and need to change in order to thrive. But you don't have to take my word for it; look around you in this time of change and pay attention to the growing number of people who have the same view of libraries as my dismissive faculty colleague—although they may not be bold enough to tell you this to your face. We have to stop believing that we are intrinsically worthy and entitled to community support just because we believe we are. More humility and servant leadership would serve us well.

Libraries have been supported for the past 200 years in the United States by both public funding and private philanthropy. Enoch Pratt, Andrew Carnegie, Bill and Melinda Gates, and others invested heavily because libraries help individuals and communities grow and thrive. Whether these philanthropists' motivation was to provide for those less fortunate, strengthen the quality of the labor force, or promote civic harmony, they believed that libraries were a good investment. Among today's tech billionaires, Bill and Melinda Gates are among the very few who support libraries in any way. Our funding now comes primarily from public sources that are under severe pressure. We have to compete for support in ways we never had to before, and that means we need new ways of working to make a visible and sustainable impact on our communities.

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In the past, libraries were masters of changing to meet community needs. Michael Gorman wrote a few years ago that libraries are the marriage of practicality and inspiration, and the history of libraries is the history of innovations to meet the needs of people, especially the ones most vulnerable in society.[1] In the nearly 200 years since the first tax-supported public library in the world opened in Peterborough, New Hampshire, libraries have provided reading material, quiet spaces, story times, literacy classes, small business development help, computer education, internet connections, and a host of other services to people in their communities.

Today, we have Professor Eric Klinenberg and the journalist Susan Orlean to thank for taking up the cause of libraries and making the case for their value. In her passionate book about the arson fire that nearly destroyed Los Angeles's Central Library in 1986, Orlean notes, "The publicness of the public library is an increasingly rare commodity. It becomes harder all the time to think of places that welcome everyone and don't charge any money for that warm embrace."[2]

In *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life*, Klinenberg writes:

> Today, as cities and suburbs reinvent themselves, and as cynics claim that government has nothing good to contribute to that process, it's important that institutions like libraries get the recognition they deserve. After all, the root of the word "library," *liber*, means both "book" and "free." Libraries stand for and exemplify something that needs defending: the public institutions that—even in an age of atomization and inequality—serve as bedrocks of civil society. Libraries are the kinds of places where ordinary people with different backgrounds, passions, and interests can take part in a living democratic culture. They are the kinds of places where the public, private, and philanthropic sectors can work together to reach for something higher than the bottom line.[3]

I am grateful to these concerned supporters of libraries for making our case, but I am worried that we in libraries are not doing enough, quickly enough to change how we work together and relate to our communities. If we do not

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turn ourselves and our libraries toward our communities, we will not have the opportunity to make a difference in people's lives. That warm embrace that Susan Orlean writes about will no longer be free, if it still exists at all.

We need widespread, well-publicized efforts by those of us who work in libraries to confidently speak up about the value we add. Although every library is unique in its history, geography, and community, we all share the same mission, one that goes back centuries. We need to build on that shared mission to develop visions and strategies that are deeply embedded in the communities we serve. We need to change the way we work in order to become efficient providers of collections and services in tune with current and prospective users. We need to demonstrate the positive impact we have on the lives of individuals and groups.

In this book, I present stories and action steps based on my experience as a librarian for over forty years. These stories are about my colleagues and I standing up for the values we share with others in all kinds of libraries, while radically changing the way we achieve those values. You will accompany us as we work to transform the Georgia Tech Library from an inwardly focused provider of services and content to an outwardly facing community partner in learning and discovery. You will read about the joys and sorrows of a major building renovation that grew into the total transformation of the library and its relationship with the campus.

To make these ideas practical as well as inspirational, I start with a chapter about first beginning with yourself. By relating some deeply personal stories about my ongoing struggle to learn how to balance courage with kindness, I offer you several suggestions to explore that will help you become more creative and engaged with others.

Seven of the next eight chapters focus on action steps for you to consider. Each chapter features stories about my work life, mostly from the last twelve years at Georgia Tech. I offer you takeaways as well as suggested activities with which to explore, share, practice, apply, and evaluate your progress. A few chapters include an "imagine-you-are" story to illustrate how a fictional librarian went about implementing the action step for that chapter. Each action step is important to building libraries that can thrive today and tomorrow. All seven steps together constitute a strategy that I am offering you.

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***Action Step One:* Look outside your social circle, profession, and organization for ideas and inspiration**

The stories in this chapter are about all the ways my colleagues and I looked for inspiration outside our library. Because we were convinced that the most successful nonprofits and commercial organizations constantly try to learn from the experience of others, we set out to make new contacts. We already knew that the best ideas to help solve library problems, such as building environmentally sound, high-density storage facilities, are from other industries. Curiosity about how others tackle tough issues and make choices will help you deal with daily operational issues and anticipate major challenges ahead. In addition to urging you to travel and experience other workplaces, you will be introduced to information interviewing by a librarian named Jenny.

***Action Step Two:* Be curious about the future**

The stories in this chapter focus on our efforts to engage others in anticipating the future at Georgia Tech and making better choices in the present. I include several methods of thinking about and planning for the future. You will read about scenario planning, working with a consulting firm to solicit community input and create a playbook, and participating in a Harwood Institute and American Library Association initiative. You will meet Pat, a fictional librarian who uses a simple four-part grid to consider options and decide how to move forward.

***Action Step Three:* Make bold, public plans**

The story in this chapter is about developing and advocating for the Georgia Tech Library's 2020 plan, which eventually became the key to securing support and funding for the library's renovation. You will read about how we dramatically built our case and challenged the university to listen to us. You will learn how we sold our ideas to campus leadership. This chapter is a call to action, encouraging you to seek partnerships, not ask permission or wait for support.

***Action Step Four:* Cultivate relationships with allies and champions**

The collaboration between Georgia Tech and Emory University to build the Library Service Center (LSC) and house a shared collection

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is the main story in this chapter. I also relate my experiences advocating for high-density storage facilities that would free up space in library buildings in three other institutions. You will read about the importance of allies and champions to help you succeed or encourage you to keep going when you fail. You will also meet an imaginary librarian named Yusef who is seeking allies and champions for his idea of hosting a digital art exhibit.

***Action Step Five:* Create successful change**

Unlike the other stories, the main one in this chapter is a cautionary tale about my underestimating the power of organizational culture to resist change. It includes my insights into what I might have done differently to achieve more positive outcomes. I encourage you to proceed with your plans, but not introduce too many changes, too quickly. I remind you to make sure that the others on your team are on board, and to provide clear transitions from the present to the future. Again, in this chapter I base my recommendations on exploring, sharing, practicing, applying, and evaluating your progress.

***Action Step Six:* Implement a framework for action and innovation**

This action step is about setting up a formal structure for designing and implementing your bold plans. You will read about my colleagues and I choosing "project portfolio management" to organize our work on the renovation of our library buildings and the transformation of library services, with the help of Georgia Tech Strategic Consulting (GTSC). As we did, I suggest you investigate the organizational techniques used in the technology industry, primarily for product development, in order to inform your choices. I make a plea for creating an environment in which you and your colleagues focus on innovating to improve your library in the future.

***Action Step Seven:* Focus on impact**

This chapter begins with stories about my efforts over many years to encourage the evaluation and assessment of library services, and my three years spent learning about the academic program assessment that is required for a university's accreditation. I focus on three kinds of impact reporting: feedback on service quality, broader ongoing

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conversations about community goals, and creating stories to illustrate the library's impact. You will imagine you're Yu Yan, a librarian who creates a new service and receives a video thank-you that will generate support for the project.

As you read the stories and learn about the action steps, bear in mind that libraries are first and foremost human organizations. There are many ways to use this book. You can explore on your own through the stories and takeaways. Think about the advice on changing your approach. Try the activities, especially the ones that bring out your creativity. Find the people in your organization who are driven by passion and mission, and share the ideas in this book with them. Discuss how the action steps can help you create the future you want for your library. Practice the steps that show promise and appeal to you. Adopt the best ones, and assess and improve them. You and your colleagues have the subject matter expertise and imagination to create ways of thinking and working that engage and impact our communities, our customers, employees, and colleagues. Become the innovators and change agents that libraries need in order to thrive.

Notes

1. Michael Gorman, *Our Enduring Values Revisited: Librarianship in an Ever-Changing World* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2015).
2. Susan Orlean, *The Library Book* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018), 67.
3. Eric Klinenberg, *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life* (New York: Broadway Books, 2018), 219–20.

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