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The Future Ain't What it Used to Be

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At midnight on December 31, 2000, Betty Bengtson and I metaphorically clinked glasses. She retired after 10 transformative years as director of the University Libraries, and I began my tenure as the new director.

In cleaning out files I found a yellowing booklet entitled *Five Objectives of a University Library*, by William E. Henry, UW librarian in 1927. Reflecting on 30 years in a university library, Henry concludes that the purpose of a university library is "to put the individual of the present in possession of the experience of the past in whatever line he may select and for the final good of the future." I intend to heed his advice.

The future of the academic library is inseparable from the future of the university, and we will be measured by how well our university manages its knowledge. We will need to advance knowledge and educate students for a future we can't even begin to imagine.

As that wise sage Yogi Berra once said, "The future ain't what it used to be."

As I envision our future, you will have access to information when, where and how you need it, and it will be preserved for generations to come. Our physical and virtual spaces will be trusted and robust.

Four areas are of critical importance as we build the library of the future: scholarly communication, digital libraries, information literacy and collaboration.

Scholarly Communication. Major changes in scholarly communication are taking place—electronic publishing, sharply escalating prices for journals, modified copyright law and intellectual property protection, and the rise of alternative distribution methods that compete with expensive commercial ones. The promise of the digital revolution has been threatened by commercial publishers intent on maximizing revenues by raising prices and restricting access. We know that we can't buy all the materials that you need. We have worked hard to supplement purchases with interlibrary loan programs and document delivery, but the current system of scholarly communication must evolve.

Digital Libraries. The Libraries has been building a digital library for nearly a decade. You use it every day through the electronic indexes, abstracts, and databases; electronic reserves; the Information Gateway; HealthLinks; and the myriad scholarly websites.

More recently, the Libraries has taken on an expanded role as publisher. We have scanned and indexed unique materials and have made them accessible to audiences worldwide. We will continue building a digital library that will enhance research, transform learning, and allow generations to talk across time in the library of the future.

Information Literacy. Today's graduates may be the first generation "overexposed" to the huge amounts of information available to them. In a perfect world, this would allow us to revel in its diversity. However, in the real world, overexposure only underscores the complexity of the information world and highlights inadequate research skills.

If our graduates are to prosper in the global information society, it is critical that they be able to locate, evaluate and use information. Although the Libraries is a national leader in information literacy, there is much more that needs to be done by all of us.

Collaboration. Collaboration grows more important every day. There are fewer and fewer arenas in which individual action suffices. Collaboration is required to build a new system of scholarly communication, develop the digital library, and engender a model information community.

I have very high expectations for the UW Libraries. The possibilities are almost limitless, but creating a preferred future will not be easy.

You have an important role to play in realizing this future. As authors or editors you can help effect positive change in scholarly communication. As educators you can share responsibility for the information literacy of students. As creators of new knowledge you can help build a digital library that has meaning. I invite you to join me in shaping a library of the future that we will all value, others will emulate, and of which William Henry would be proud.

The future ain't what it used to be, but it is ours to determine.