



OPINION

Each month, OPINION features contributions from invited guest writers. The opinions expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect those of the Australian Library and Information Association.

Collective amnesia – are we complicit in the closure of special libraries?

The editorial *Collective amnesia: reversing the global epidemic of addiction library closures* recently appeared in the alcohol and other drug (AOD) sector's most prominent international journal, *Addiction*. It highlighted the down-sizing and closing of more than twenty-five AOD libraries in the United States.

One of the authors of this piece, US-based Andrea Mitchell, Executive Director of SALIS (Substance Abuse Librarians and Information Specialists) reiterates the argument presented in *Collective amnesia* – that libraries are closing and, by extension, librarians are being discarded. Materials are being thrown out and possibly lost and to stop this erosion we need collaboration among the field's professionals and funders, strategies to be developed to preserve what has been built, and calls for digitisation and creation of digital archives to preserve materials in digital format and make them more widely and freely available. Essentially, think about the value of a library and the services which LIS professionals produce to satisfy their information needs. Is it really that simple to throw away a library and the gate-keepers with their keys?

One of the intrinsic questions asked when facing decisions about what needs to be cut or down-sized, is, what is its value? How do you measure the value of an information service and the information itself? If a collection has been built over a number of years, addressing the needs of a particular research audience and beyond, catalogued, arranged, filed, etc., such that when someone is searching for a particular piece of information, it is accessed in an efficient manner, with possible new information added or some other kernel found serendipitously in the search, what is that worth?

Likewise Christine Goodair (Co-ordinator of National & International Programmes at the International Centre for Drug Policy St George's, University of London and President of SALIS) has found that within the substance misuse sector, despite the demand for evidence based resources, the loss and down-sizing of dedicated library and documentation centres in substance misuse in the UK and Europe is a matter for concern because there is nothing to replace them – not even virtual collections. This erosion of resources is detrimental to the sector as many are left to seek information from the internet which is time consuming and questionable in terms of the veracity and quality of resources found.

The situation in Australia mirrors the experience of Andrea and Christine. ADLIS (Australian Alcohol and Drug Librarians and Information Specialists) which was originally established in 1978, back in 1993 had a membership of about 25 libraries (including three organisations from New Zealand). In November of this year ADLIS will meet again after 19 years, but now there are only 13 member organisations, many of which have been downsized.

Special library closures occur across disciplines

not just specialist health areas like AOD. Some are closing, receiving a massively reduced budget or the library is being relegated to a basement (or cupboard) to die a slow death.

SPECIAL LIBRARIES ARE WORTH
THE EFFORT NOT JUST TO LIS PROFESSIONALS
OR RESEARCHERS BUT TO EVERYONE

Australian LIS professionals are aware of this issue and the need to take action. However I suggest that many of us lack professional passion and accept library closures as just an inevitable sign of the times. It may be that our own apathy is aiding and abetting library closures. I can't help but wonder if other professional groups would quietly stand by and watch not just their livelihood, but the integrity of their discipline disappear?

I believe the key to survival for us is twofold. It's important to have a real awareness and appreciation of our parent organisation and be expert in our specialist information. We must be prepared to diversify and find new opportunities within the workplace, become invaluable, integrate, and infiltrate within the organisation. Maybe fulfil more than one role to safeguard your primary task. Library managers need clear strategic goals to know when to fight and when to compromise, when to grab an opportunity and when to dodge a poisoned chalice. It's a long game involving the adoption of broad strategic approaches and looking at the bigger picture rather than distinct library specific tasks. Time, effort, and enthusiasm are required to deploy strategies that might save special collections, your library, and ultimately your job.

But beyond this, librarians need to speak out, advocate within our own organisations and out in the real world for quality information, libraries, and LIS professionals. Become involved and strengthen your professional networks and be the library's voice in other outside networks. Infiltrate and promote at all opportunities: special libraries are worth the effort not just to LIS professionals or researchers but to everyone. Find your voice and make it heard.

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