

# □ WHITE PAPERS □

BY HERBERT S. WHITE

## The Double-Edged Sword of Library Volunteerism

The role of volunteers in the structure of American institutions is a crucial and an honored one. Without volunteers, we would have no scouting or Little League programs; symphony orchestras and opera companies would be in even greater difficulty than they already are; and hospital patients might miss out on the books, magazines, mail, and flowers that delivery by volunteers provide. Like most readers of this column, I have worked as a volunteer—in my case, in scouting. There is no reason that public and school libraries should not also benefit from the additional support that volunteers can provide.

However, while the role of volunteers is crucial and deserves respect, it also requires a clear understanding of what volunteers do and, just as importantly, what they cannot do. My wife's role as a museum docent does not make her a curator, and in the absence of curators, museum galleries are sometimes closed. Volunteers do not need to trespass to be appreciated or feel important. It is no insult to them to be differentiated from the regular staff. Indeed, they usually wear distinctive uniforms and badges, not to be humiliated but to be honored.

### Volunteers and libraries

When I visit local public libraries I can tell who is doing what, but many patrons cannot. In academic libraries not only students but senior faculty may assume that anyone who works in a library, including the sophomores at the circulation desk, must be a librarian. Why are we so loathe to differentiate? Is it democracy, a sense of modesty, a lack of unique and professional

pride? Our British librarian colleagues append their degrees to their signatures; we don't. We can see the reluctance to identify and credit ourselves in the objections to the rather modest Library Week slogan "Librarians Make It Happen." Some prefer the institutional identification in which libraries (with or without librarians) make it happen, whatever "it" is.

Why am I concerned about the prescribed role of volunteers? An article originally published in the *Los Angeles Times* ("Parents Filling Gaps in Money-Strapped Schools," June 6, 1992), and then reprinted in other newspapers, including my local one, notes that the Torrance, California Unified School District does not have a single paid librarian on any of its 17 elementary campuses. Instead, the school libraries are run by more than 100 parent volunteers who raise money for books, rebind the collection, and staff the checkout desks.

The item goes on to quote Carol O'Brien, council president of the district's Parent-Teacher Association and former school board member: "The school district just doesn't have the money to staff elementary school libraries. Parents wanted their kids to have libraries, and they decided that the only way they were going to get them was by running them themselves." It is reasonable to assume that what has been reported in Torrance is happening throughout California, and the virus could easily spread.

### With friends like these . . .

I have to try to remember that O'Brien is really a friend who believes in libraries, she just (and this is stated without malice) simply doesn't know what constitutes a library. However, I am certainly not ready to accept her assertion that the district doesn't have the money to staff elementary school libraries. I will grant that the district doesn't have enough money to do everything it would like to do, but the specific decision to eliminate librarians is based on a value system that assumes

we are not as important as some of other things in the budget. I don't know what all of these other things are, but I would be willing to attempt to analyze the district's budget priorities in order to find something else to cut.

It is easy to see why the decision to eliminate librarians was made comfortably, if it can be argued that what remains—buying and mending books and staffing the checkout desk—is what defines a library. If school leaders don't know what defines a library, perhaps it is because they haven't told them clearly enough. If I make an effort, and of course what follows could be adapted to any ca-

Parents of Torrance! There is more library service than rebinding books and staffing the checkout desk. If librarians matter to you, work to get your kids back into the budget. Stop tending to yourselves that you have libraries, because you don't. Your children won't have the tools to face a competitive marketplace. There are to be only two possible solutions: something about a political process that strangles this crucial resource. Or

The reference to the mending of books as one of the most visible librarian activities really hurts, but where did PTA get that idea?

Let me share another experience without necessarily endorsing its extremism, although I do claim to understand it. I recall my service on the American Library Association (ALA) accreditation team for an urban elementary school in the mid-1970s. The city had just had a massive budget cut, resulting in the layoff of librarians and the closing of branches. During a visit, the officers of the library school student association met with a concerned citizen who suggested that library school students might provide a valuable public service—and also gain some experience—by reopening now closed branches.

They turned him down. "We're not scabs. Hire librarians."



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**Substitutions**  
 is my fear, which I have articu-... often, that the fascination with... something that can be called a... —under any conditions and... my staff, or even with no staff—... kill off our profession entirely... ment that there is not enough... for all the things we would like... will always be with us; indeed... is always been true. The ques-... as then, is what to do about it... substituting something called a li-... an actual library is a bait-and-... tactic that would be illegal in... rds and is certainly immoral in... the parents of Torrance are bel-... ly misled because the solution... is glibly simple as it has been... ed. Their children do not have... libraries. What they have is a... of books watched over by... people. However, that doesn't... a library any more than the... ty of a cool compress for a... brow substitutes for a doctor... aps better than nothing but... price of confusion.  
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then certainly no one else will mention it. Making that distinction is not an act of arrogance or cruelty. All work, in any organization, is important. It should be done well, and it should be recognized and appreciated. However, without that distinction, the pressures to cut expenses will combine with the ability to pretend that there really is a library long after it is gone.

**A call for self-discipline**

That is why the undefined and unregulated use of volunteers makes me nervous, even as I approve the general premise. Torrance is just a handy example of what even nice people can do to us. If this happens with our friends (at least the friends of libraries if not of librarians), then what can we expect from those who don't care about either? Do we have the self-discipline to define the appropriate role for all the people who participate in library activities, even in the face of never-ending pressures from budget-cutters and our desperate desire to save everything that now exists? Certainly school boards, city officials, and even parents will always take the easy and most painless approach. But what's in it for us and, ultimately, even for them?

I continue to stress that lack of money is the easy villain in this scenario, but it is not the issue. Insufficient funding is a permanent disease, and it varies only by degrees. Whether politicians provide funds, perhaps by cutting something else, or cut libraries in order to fund something else, or cut everything to protect the tax base, is a matter of assessing potential political consequences. If it is possible to stop funding libraries but still claim to have them, the decision is no longer painful; it is absurdly simple. We have to be the whistle-blowers, by stressing to would-be friends like Carol O'Brien that their "solutions" only make things worse.

There are, of course, other complexities in the use of volunteers, beyond the political issues. Volunteers are presumably cheap, but unless they are managed and directed, and unless they understand what they are supposed to do and what they are not supposed to do, they may cost a lot more than their nonsalaries. Volunteers may bring their own agendas, or they may be simply incompetent. One of my favorite lectures a number of years ago dealt with the question of how to fire a volunteer. That will have to wait for another column.



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