

The Human side of reference and information services in academic libraries:
Adding value in the digital world. Edited by Lesley S. J. Farmer
Oxford: Chandos, 2007. 9781843342571

Reviewer: Adrian Machiraju (Royal Holloway, University of London)

Book rating: 2/5

This volume is a compilation of chapters written by different members of the library service of California State University at Long Beach, led and edited by a librarianship professor. CSULB, with 35,000 students and an annual budget of over 300 million dollars, is one of the largest component members of the vast California State University system. This seems a useful setting from which to write about academic information services in the modern world, and I approached the book with high hopes.

The title suggests a focussed study of information services in academic libraries, but this proves to be misleading. It attempts to cover almost every aspect of academic librarianship, including staffing, collection development, induction procedures, software selection, digital preservation, planning and quality assessment. As the book is not long, little over a hundred pages of text, this inevitably results in cursory treatment of the topics. It does not state its target audience, but the coverage is too basic to be useful to anyone beyond the stage of library students, and perhaps not advanced ones. Do we really need to be told, in 2007, that “it is certainly advantageous for library managers to be technologically informed”? (p.25)

The book feels longer than its hundred-plus pages, and this is only partly due to the language, which is mostly in the highly abstract and impersonal style expected in American academic circles. With so much crammed into a short space, every other page contains lists, and often they are long ones; nine bullet points or more are frequent. Given the popularity of books of lists, that may endear it to some readers, but reading through lists of web sites or software packages rapidly becomes tedious. I doubt if most students retain much from it.

In a lengthy introduction (with only two bullet-pointed lists), the editor states that the book was planned as a case study. A case study based on experience at CSULB was just what I was hoping for, but as the book progresses there are rarely any case studies or practical examples offered in support of the positions taken. Indeed, in a book which lays stress on the importance of critical learning for students, we are asked to take a great deal on the authority of the authors, with no supporting evidence. Those examples which are given are more often drawn from the published literature than the authors' own experience.

Long stretches are written almost entirely in the conditional – this might, this should, this could. The authors seem conscientiously determined to cover everything, when they would have been justified in picking out only those methods or products they have used

themselves. This applies especially to listings of alternative software packages, which are inevitably becoming dated already.

I regret being unable to give this well intentioned exercise a warmer welcome. My impression is that personal conversation with these idealistic and committed professionals might be very rewarding. I really cannot say the same for reading through their book.

About the reviewer:

Adrian Machiraju is an information consultant at Royal Holloway, University of London.