

The Future of System Libraries Series: North Central Kansas Libraries System

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The only wedding picture I have of my maternal grandparents shows a very young couple sitting high on a wagon, drawn by a matched pair of Missouri mules. In the span of their lifetime they lived to see grandchildren in college and astronauts on the moon. These were both fairly profound social and technological changes. The pace of change has accelerated; instead of thinking in terms of decades, we now experience significant changes every few months, in how we work, learn, and play. We live in a time of instant messaging and global economies and communities.

The idea of predicting where all of this will take the libraries we love is an “iffy” proposition at best. One thing is certain: our libraries, be they public, school, academic or special, will not thrive if Kansas communities don’t prosper as well. Every one of us has a stake in the future of local community development. Librarians and trustees have to work to make the library a valuable resource in the civic life of the community. Many libraries have made good progress in this area. That’s good, because the era of static information systems is over. This is not a question of being for or against books and the printed word. New formats and technology have already changed our landscape.

Consider the work of Thomas Frey, futurist and Executive Director of the DaVinci Institute. Frey recently posted an article on the Institute’s website that identified 10 key trends that he believes will affect libraries. It is the last two items on his list that are most relevant to this discussion.

Frey believes that we are moving from a product-based economy to an experience-based economy. There are lots of ways for people to get books and information, so why go to a library? Frey believes it is the library experience that will keep people coming. We see this point illustrated at every story time. There are lots of ways for kids to experience stories, but parents bring their kids to the library for what they believe to be a unique and valuable experience. Frey tells us that when the experience of being at the library is a good one, people will keep coming.

Frey’s last prediction is that libraries will transform from a center of information to a center of culture. He describes a culture-based library as “one that taps into the spirit of the community, assessing priorities and providing resources to support the things deemed most important.”

This futurist calls for libraries to reinvent themselves. This involves embracing new technologies and providing creative space to bring people together. The future can seem pretty daunting to librarians who are working hard to deal with the present. However, I am optimistic. Librarians have repeatedly demonstrated the interest and ability to take on new technology and work together creatively.

My father advised me on my first job to “make yourself useful.” This advice works for libraries, as well as for library systems. Library systems must look to the communities they serve and find new ways to assist and support local libraries as they develop and transform. We are all in this development together, but

that is precisely how we work best.