

Partners in Learning

Fulfilling patron needs in a struggling economy

by Jim Rettig

If you are not one of the 11 million-plus who have seen Karl Fisch's "Did you know?" video (tinyurl.com/2rzrn9) or its 2006 predecessor, "Shift Happens," on YouTube, I recommend that you invest eight minutes and 19 seconds to watch it. Then ask yourself: How is it relevant to libraries?

Fisch's thought-provoking presentation asks which country in the world is the richest, is the center of global business and finance, has the strongest educational system, and the highest standard of living. The answer: the United Kingdom—in 1900. It then notes that in 2006 the United States produced 1.3 million new college graduates, while India produced 3.1 million, and China 3.3 million. The implication is unmistakable. Just as in the 20th century the United States supplanted the U.K. as the world's preeminent nation, China and India are racing to supplant the United States in the 21st century. Education of their growing populations is a key component in their competitive strategies in the global marketplace.

The video also presents data illustrating the rapidity of change in technology and scientific knowledge, the emergence of new academic disciplines, and the swift adoption of text messaging, the internet, and other communications media. Fisch concludes: "we are living in exponential times."

Created for a 2006 meeting of the faculty of Arapahoe High School in Centennial, Colorado, the video notes that "We are currently preparing stu-

dents for jobs and technologies that don't yet exist . . . in order to solve problems we don't even know are problems yet." It asks the educational establishment: "Are you providing the resources and training necessary to prepare students to be successful in 21st century society?" The question has other formulations: "Are we preparing to-day's students to be lifelong learners?" "Are we teaching today's students how libraries are partners in their lifelong learning?"

Through public libraries' story hours and preschool literacy programs, through classroom and one-to-one lessons by school librarians, through the guidance of college librarians, through public library services for adults, our multitiered network of libraries demonstrates that the library is the only agency or institution in American society that provides lifelong learning.

As the nation's economy struggles, public libraries nationwide report increases in circulation and new demand for other services. Services such as Cuyahoga County (Ohio) Public Library's long-established career center are becoming more important. It "empowers adults by offering resources, expert advice and counsel, and a setting where everyone can explore the next step of their unique career journeys."

"Did you know?" cites a U.S. Department of Labor estimate, "that today's learners will have 10 to 14

jobs . . . by their 38th birthday." As global competition transforms employment patterns, as the domestic economy fluctuates, as individuals discover new interests and pursue new careers, lifelong learning has become a constant necessity in Americans' lives. Public libraries of-



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fer a lifetime of learning opportunities, just as academic libraries offer opportunities to career changers who enroll in community college or other adult education programs.

But do adults, motivated either by desire or grim necessity, recognize how much their libraries can help them realize their ambitions? The current economic trough offers libraries an opportunity to demonstrate to new and returning users that libraries are partners in their lifelong learning.

The relevance of "Did you know?" to libraries is obvious. Each library just needs to find effective ways to make the obvious obvious to those it serves. How is your library responding to this opportunity to make lifelong learners lifelong library users? Please share those stories with me at jrettig@richmond.edu. ■

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