

# Editorial: And Now for Something (Completely) Different

Marc Truitt

The issue of *ITAL* you hold in your hands—be that issue physical or virtual; we won't even go into the question of your hands!—represents something new for us. For a number of years, Ex Libris (and previously, Endeavor Information Systems) has generously sponsored the LITA/Ex Libris (née LITA/Endeavor) Student Writing Award competition.

The competition seeks manuscript submissions from enrolled LIS students in the areas of *ITAL*'s publishing interests; a LITA committee on which the editor of *ITAL* serves as an ex-officio member evaluates the entries and names a winner.

Traditionally, the winning essay has appeared in the pages of *ITAL*. In recent years, perhaps mirroring the waning interest in publication in traditional peer-reviewed venues, the number of entrants in the competition has declined. In 2008, for instance, there were but nine submissions, and to get those, we had to extend the deadline six weeks from the end of February to mid-April. In previous years, as I understand it, there often were even fewer.

This year, without moving the goalposts, we had—hold onto your hats!—twenty-seven entries. Of these, the review committee identified six finalists for discussion. The turnout was so good, in fact, that with the agreement of the committee, we at *ITAL* proposed to publish not only the winning paper but the other finalist entries as well. We hope that you will find them as stimulating as have we. Even more importantly, we hope that by publishing such a large group of papers representing 2009's best in technology-focused LIS work, we will encourage similarly large numbers of quality submissions in the years to come.

I would like to offer sincere thanks to my University of Alberta colleague Sandra Shores, who as guest editor for this issue worked tirelessly over the past few months to shepherd quality student papers into substantial and interesting contributions to the literature. She and Managing Editor Judith Carter—who guest-edited our recent Discovery Issue—have both done fabulous jobs with their respective *ITAL* special issues. Bravo!

## Ex Libris' sponsorship

In one of those ironic twists that one more customarily associates with movie plots than with real life, the LITA/Ex Libris Student Writing Award recently almost lost its sponsor. At very nearly the same time that Sandra was completing the preparation of the manuscripts for submission to ALA Production Services (where they are copyedited and typeset), we learned that Ex Libris had notified LITA that it had "decided to cease sponsoring" the Student Writing Award. A brief round of e-mails among principals at LITA,

Ex Libris, and *ITAL* ensued, with the outcome being that Carl Grant, president of Ex Libris North America, graciously agreed to continue sponsorship for another year and reevaluate underwriting the award for the future. We at *ITAL* and I personally are grateful.

Carl's message about the sponsorship raises some interesting issues on which I think we should reflect. His first point goes like this:

It simply is not realistic for libraries to continue to believe that vendors have cash to fund these things at the same levels when libraries don't have cash to buy things (or want to delay purchases or buy the product for greatly reduced amounts) from those same vendors. Please understand the two *are* tied together.

Point taken and conceded. Money is tight. Carl's argument, I think, speaks as well to a larger, implied question. Libraries and library vendors share highly synergistic and, in recent years, increasingly antagonistic relationships. Library vendors—and I think library system vendors in particular—come in for much vitriol and precious little appreciation from those of us on the customer side. We all think they charge too much (and by implication, must also make too much), that their support and service are frequently unresponsive to our needs, and that their systems are overly large, cumbersome, and usually don't do things the way we want them done. At the same time, we forget that they are catering to the needs and whims of a small, highly specialized market that is characterized by numerous demands, a high degree of complexity, and whose members—"standards" notwithstanding—rarely perform the same task the same way across institutions. We expect very individualized service and support, but at the same time are penny-pinching misers in our ability and willingness to pay for these services. We are beggars, yet we insist on our right to be choosers. Finally, at least for those of us of a certain generation—and yep, I count myself among its members—we chose librarianship for very specific reasons, which often means we are more than a little uneasy with concepts of "profit" and "bottom line" as applied to our world. We fail to understand the open-source dictum that "free as in kittens and not as in beer" means that we *will* have to pay *someone* for these services—it's only a question of whom we will pay.

Carl continues, making another point:

I do appreciate that you're trying to provide us more recognition as part of this. Frankly, that was another consideration in our thought of dropping it—we just didn't feel like we were getting much for it.

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**Marc Truitt** (marc.truitt@ualberta.ca) is Associate University Librarian, Bibliographic and Information Technology Services, University of Alberta Libraries, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, and Editor of *ITAL*.

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I've said before and I'll say again, I've never, in all my years in this business had a single librarian say to me that because we sponsored this or that, it was even a consideration in their decision to buy something from us. Not once, *ever*. Companies like ours live on sales and service income. I want to encourage you to help make librarians aware that if they *do* appreciate when we do these things, it sure would be nice if they'd let us know in some real tangible ways that show that is true. . . . Good will does not pay bills or salaries unless that good will translates into purchases of products and services (and please note, I'm not just speaking for Ex Libris here, I'm saying this for all vendors).

And here is where Carl's and my views may begin to diverge. Let's start by drawing a distinction between vendor tchotchkes and vendor sponsorship. In fairness, Carl didn't say anything about tchotchkes, so why am I? I do so because I think that we need to bear in mind that there are multiple ways vendors seek to advertise themselves and their services to us, and geegaws are one such. Trinkets are nice—I have yet to find a better gel pen than the ones given out at IUG 14 (would that I could get more!)—but other than reminding me of a vendor's name, they serve little useful purpose.

The latter, vendor sponsorship, is something very different, very special, and not readily totaled on the bottom line. Carl is quite right that sponsorship of the Student Writing Award will not *in and of itself* cause me to buy Aleph, Primo, or SFX (Oh right, I have that last one already!). These are products whose purchase is the result of lengthy and complex reviews that include highly detailed and painstaking needs analysis, specifications, RFPs, site visits, demonstrations, and so on. Due diligence to our parent institutions and obligations to our users require that we search for a balance among best-of-breed solutions, top-notch support, and fair pricing. Those things aren't related to sponsorship.

What *is* related to sponsorship, though, is a sense of shared values and interests. Of "doing the right thing." I may or may not buy Carl's products because of the considerations above (and yes, Ex Libris fields very strong contenders in all areas of library automation); I definitely *will*, though, *be more likely to think favorably* of Ex Libris as a company that has similar—though not necessarily identical—values to mine, if it is obvious that it encourages and materially supports professional activities that I think are important. Support for professional growth and scholarly publication in our field are two such values. I'm sure we can all name examples of this sort of behavior: In addition to support of the Student Writing Award, Ex Libris' long-standing prominence in the National Information Standards Organization (NISO) comes to mind. So too does the founding and ongoing support by Innovative Interfaces and the library consulting firm R2 for the Taiga Forum (<http://www.taigaforum.org/>), a

group of academic associate university librarians. To the degree that I believe Ex Libris or another firm shares my values by supporting such activities—that it "does the right thing"—I will be just a bit more inclined to think positively of it when I'm casting about for solutions to a technology or other need faced by my institution. I will think of that firm as kin, if you will.

With that, I will end this by again thanking Carl and Ex Libris—*because we don't say thank you often enough!*—for their generous support of the LITA/Ex Libris Student Writing Award. I hope that it will continue for a long time to come. That support is something about which I do care deeply. If you feel similarly—be it about the Student Writing Award, NISO, Taiga, or whatever—I urge you to say so by sending an appropriate e-mail to your vendor's representative or by simply saying thanks in person to the company's head honcho on the ALA exhibit floor. And the next time you are neck-deep in seemingly identical vendor quotations and need a way to figure out how to decide between them, remember the importance of shared values.

## Dan Marmion

Longtime LITA members and *ITAL* readers in particular will recognize the name of Dan Marmion, editor of this journal from 1999 through 2004. Many current and recent members of the *ITAL* editorial board—including Managing Editor Judith Carter, Webmaster Andy Boze, Board member Mark Dehmlow, and I—can trace our involvement with *ITAL* to Dan's enthusiastic period of stewardship as editor.

In addition to his leadership of *ITAL*, Dan has been a mentor, colleague, boss, and friend. His service philosophy is best summarized in the words of a simple epigram that for many years has graced the wall behind the desk in his office: "IT'S ALL ABOUT ACCESS!"

Because of health issues, and in order to devote more time to his wife Diana, daughter Jennifer, and granddaughter Madelyn, Dan recently decided to retire from his position as Associate Director for Information Systems and Digital Access at the University of Notre Dame Hesburgh Libraries. He also will pursue his personal interests, which include organizing and listening to his extensive collection of jazz recordings, listening to books on CD, and following the exploits of his favorite sports teams, the football Irish of Notre Dame, the Indianapolis Colts, and the New York Yankees.

We want to express our deep gratitude for all he has given to the profession, to LITA, to *ITAL*, and to each of us personally over many years. We wish him all the best as he embarks on this new phase of his life.