

Academic Library Futures

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In the uncertain economic times of 2009, predicting the future has become quite a challenge. The impact of budget reductions over the next two years on higher education could change the very nature of our institutions. Major private institutions are decreasing spending as the value of their endowments decrease. Public institutions continue to struggle with less and less state funding and fewer sources for additional revenue. Tuition increases cannot resolve the economic crisis as the public protests the rising cost of education. Institutions will need to focus on their core missions and establish a few areas of excellence to retain their reputations as viable institutions. Major research libraries will also need to focus their efforts to support the core missions of the campus and will be less and less able to collect materials in a wide range of subject areas that may be of little use to the campus.

In this rather dismal time, academic libraries face growing challenges. Academic libraries are challenged to create a financially viable hybrid model that bridges the gap between those in the academy who are resisting change and still embrace a traditional view of the world of research and classroom instruction and those who embrace a digital world with virtual classrooms and electronic access to resources and collections. While academic libraries have for many years tried to accommodate both worlds, they now face the challenge of reduced resources and staff in this era of budget reductions. No longer can a library rely on neighboring institutions to help out when local resources are decreased because almost all institutions are making cuts. Services have to be prioritized and libraries cannot provide all the services that people may want. For example, in 2009 the University of Arizona library eliminated its reserve system, leaving it to instructors to create their own reserve readings as part of the course management system. The transfer of this traditional basic service to the faculty is only the beginning of the changes we may see in academic libraries.

Economic factors are not the only circumstances that are causing libraries to rethink their missions, goals, and strategies. Of course, libraries are addressing the needs of the changing student populations as the students who may be more comfortable in their digital worlds than they are in the real world enter our institutions. These students expect online access to the resources and services they need, and they are finding that most institutions are moving to address this demand. Students may take some of their courses online and others in a classroom. Online courses are open to all and are not just a distance education option. However, decisions about what students want and need may be made without data to help inform decision makers about their best options. University offices with their own agendas may be determining campus policies without talking to today's students. Or there may be little recognition of the needs of different audiences using online resources. A webpage designed to attract today's teenagers may not be adequate to meet the needs of the library to provide access to complex electronic resources. Policies affecting distance education students may not mesh with policies for face-to-face instruction even though students may be taking both types of courses. Libraries may still be working with faculty who believe that students should browse print journals even though libraries are moving to more and more electronic-only subscriptions. Trying to bridge the gap

between the last century of higher education and current new faculty and students becomes the responsibility of libraries that want to remain relevant on their campuses and to their constituencies. Libraries must help faculty accept the changing publishing landscape and move into the electronic age because libraries cannot support redundant print and electronic collections and services.

What are the new roles for academic libraries and how do they affect the future of the library? One role is to think of the libraries as part of the overall publishing process. Academic libraries have a larger role to play than just purchasing the scholarly output of the academy. Libraries need to be more than lending libraries that provide students with access to books and journals but little else. Academic libraries are more than “free books stores.” Libraries can be part of the process of making the scholarly output of their campuses available to the world. Academic libraries are creating institutional repositories as a way to preserve and provide access to journal articles and books written by their faculty. Libraries that have access to publishing expertise can add original monographic publications to their repositories, making scholarly materials without commercial markets available. Libraries can look for ways to work with faculty experts and university presses to provide a peer review process for original publications to advance scholarly publishing that is recognized as valuable to the academic community. By partnering with campus faculty and presses, libraries can help advance changes in scholarly publishing beyond the commercial market while remaining as the content provider to the campus.

Using the libraries’ catalog and search engines as a means to provide access to campus resources that are not part of the libraries’ collections is another role that libraries have assumed. Using library software to make image collections, slide collections, audio, video, and multimedia resources, and data sets held by departments, museums, and research centers available raises the visibility of campus resources while emphasizing the role of the library as an information provider. By partnering with other units and not being territorial about the library software packages and search engine options, libraries can cement their place on their campuses as more than an inventory control system for print-based and purchased e-resources.

Partnerships go beyond collections options. Libraries in the future will need to find ways to work more closely with faculty, providing research and instructional support. Librarians who wish to spend their time in their offices avoiding face-to-face contact with faculty and avoiding promoting library services will become the dinosaurs of the profession. Future academic librarians must get out of their comfort zones and develop true partnerships with faculty, helping to put together courses and class assignments and ensuring that researchers know how to find the materials they need to be successful. Libraries need to find more interesting ways to teach information-finding skills, to move away from the idea that students need to be fantastic searchers to realizing that students need to know how to efficiently find what they need. If a student needs a few references to complete an assignment, librarians should show students the best way to find two or three key resources rather than insisting that the students learn how to do an exhaustive search every time they seek information.

Academic librarians need to learn to sell the value of libraries to the students, particularly graduate students. These students become tomorrow’s donors to the institution, and librarians

need to help potential donors connect with the libraries to create an “alumni” base for the libraries. Libraries will not be able to survive without private support, and building the donor base for future support is a key role for today’s librarians. This task cannot be fulfilled by a development officer alone. Each librarian who interacts with users needs to be thinking about how to create the best possible user experience so that today’s users can become tomorrow’s donors.

Can academic libraries survive and thrive in the future? I believe they can if they are willing to make the tough choices to let go of the past, seriously review sacred cows, and build the partnerships that are needed to cement the role of the library as more than the symbol of the heart of the campus. Tomorrow’s academic library can be the content provider for the campus, the group that connects scholars with the scholarly and cultural record regardless of format, provides access to primary source materials, and helps to disseminate the scholarship of the campus. To students and faculty, the libraries can be the partner that helps unravel the complexities of the information world and can create a positive user experience in which students and faculty feel welcomed and valued whether they enter the building or visit the library online. If academic libraries choose to not change and to not meet the challenges of today’s world, they stand a chance of becoming little more than a well air-conditioned and heated landfill of unwanted materials.