

The Future Is Now

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Creative thinking about the ways in which a profession can re-invent itself in a rapidly changing world is more than just an exercise. It's required work for those organizations who want to avoid becoming obsolete, and libraries certainly fall into this category. However, many of us find it necessary to keep one foot in today's reality while brainstorming about the future, as a way of locating a feasible path forward. Such is the approach offered in this essay.

A number of factors make it difficult for any organization to envision the future and move there rapidly. Among the items on the list that take time and effort are the revision of goals and the strategies to achieve them, analysis of staff retraining or personnel changes necessary, and possible changes in organizational structure. Involving everyone in the organization in the process is important, to generate support for such changes and to apply the expertise of staff to the design. Asking individuals to change what they may have been doing for years can be difficult and doesn't happen overnight. Still, progress can be made at a reasonable pace.

But for organizations with modest financial resources, such as community college libraries, the deal breaker early on can be costly changes to facilities or funds for expensive equipment that may take years to secure and may not be guaranteed from reallocation to institutional needs, such as the reduction of unexpected gaps caused by reductions in state or local funding. As a result, routes to major changes in such organizations need to have low out-of-pocket costs. Does that mean that big, outside-the-box thinking is unrealistic for academic libraries of modest means? Are large, well-funded libraries, possibly only those with endowments of their own, the only part of the academic library world that can lead the way to the future? Not necessarily.

What follows are a few examples of library-of-the-future scenarios that illustrate changes that can move modestly funded libraries, such as those in community colleges, far ahead within the twenty-first century. If these operations and services are within reach of community college libraries, then it is also reasonable to assume that they can be scaled upward for use in the generally larger and more affluent sectors of higher education as well.

Scenario 1

Affordability of higher education for many students is an increasing problem. One well-known cost factor for students is the rapidly increasing cost of textbooks. An informal, self-reported count in one state system of colleges was recently taken via an e-mail listserv survey of its member libraries to determine the number of those libraries that provide textbook collections in support of current courses for their students. The spectrum of policies reported was a broad one, with most who do provide textbooks doing so through short-term, in-library use of one or two copies of each textbook made available by means of a reserve book operation and which covers a significant portion of the courses offered in a given semester. Those libraries that actively

purchase textbooks for current courses, rather than relying on donations of exam copies from faculty, already number close to one-third of the system's community college campuses. The need is real and growing, given the stretch that many community college students make just to pay tuition, let alone any additional campus fees or costs for textbooks and supplies. These additional costs are frequently the deciding factor in whether or not a student enrolls.

A future-thinking step toward addressing this significant cost issue might be library and bookstore collaborations that negotiate for affordable licensing of textbooks in digital format that can be delivered to a variety of end user tools, from a student's laptop to e-book readers loaned by the library for students who cannot afford their own equipment. In addition, negotiated pricing could allow for in-library use only of the licensed textbook content on library equipment by students enrolled in specific courses but who are not able to afford their own digital copy of a textbook for use anywhere and anytime. Group negotiations for licenses by multiple campuses in statewide systems or consortia may have the necessary economic clout to achieve workable prices.

In addition to high-cost textbooks, libraries of the future must rapidly increase the availability of all types of digital content to student-use devices that have become central to their daily lives. In this effort among community colleges, in which equity is central to institutional mission, libraries will need to redirect funds to loan the digital-use devices themselves to students who cannot afford to purchase equipment for their exclusive use. For equipment with web connectivity, available content should include access to both campus-produced and licensed content delivered through a college's courseware system, library e-books, e-reference titles, full-text journal articles, reference databases, and online librarian support service, in addition to textbooks.

Access to all of these types of materials through one login to a single device is central to improving a student's productivity and learning experience. Features such as the ability to do markups of relevant text from a variety of sources to then share them quickly and easily with others working on group assignments or collaborative projects are equally important.

In this scenario, libraries of the future need to determine how to shift a much greater portion of their expenditures to loanable equipment for use of digital content, which means buying less and less "just in case" material while rapidly developing shared digital collections among peer libraries.

Scenario 2

To build on the "just in time" instead of the "just in case" purchase model that libraries of the future must embrace to survive, broader application of existing print-on-demand equipment already in use in some libraries—capable of producing book-length publications—needs to take hold (University of Michigan News Service, 2008). Initially, geographically proximal libraries could share print-on-demand equipment and use a courier service with multiple deliveries per day on a circuit to move the paperback quality books printed at one location to the member libraries.

Options already exist for libraries to jointly invest in collaborative initiatives outside of their own institutions. We have a history of collaboration and resource sharing through any number of national, state, regional, and local library groups and consortia. As a result, we routinely achieve many economies of scale in the operation of our libraries and have shared training and support mechanisms outside of our campuses to provide for the rapid adoption of innovations. It is entirely possible that a local or regional library group could jointly purchase and fund operation of print-on-demand equipment.

Such equipment existing today can print and bind a book in five to seven minutes, depending on the number of pages, for a production cost of about \$10.00 (University of Michigan News Service, 2008). Print orders could be placed upon a library user's request that fits library collection development criteria. Libraries could choose to provide print-on-demand books without charge to their library users who return the book to be added to the library's collection after its initial use or could sell copies of any book available through the service on a cost recovery basis.

Assuming improvements over time in print-on-demand technology, it is possible to imagine a web-based print service for books that could support many more libraries through a network that utilizes affordable book-length printing onsite at any participating library. Print-on-demand services could enjoy an extended life cycle in the library of the future. Initially, such technology might be heavily used, at least until e-book readers are inexpensively available. Further out, it seems likely that library users will want to make choices among options that might include the outright purchase of a digital copy, short-term lease of the same digital content, or purchase of a print-on-demand copy.

Scenario 3

Once it becomes possible for digital books to actually serve in place of their print counterparts, libraries serving similar audiences—such as academic libraries supporting comparable degree programs—the promise of shared collections that achieve savings by reducing at least some of the costs of duplicative holdings, such as processing and storage, will be realized. Such savings have positive implications for other parts of academic library operations.

For example, as the shift in expenditures from print to digital collections moves forward in the library of the future to include most books as well as the article-length material already available, changes in the way library space is utilized will become more affordable and therefore more widespread. Academic libraries of all types will be able to more easily reach the goal of providing a physical learning commons space without costly building expansions.

Library space previously needed for print book collections can be used to bring together multiple campus services from separate physical locations. These services that support student learning outside the classroom can be co-located in the interconnected manner that fits with the way in which students actually work. Colleges and universities that can afford to do so now already benefit from bringing services such as academic computing, instructional technology, and tutoring services into a library learning commons.

Feasibility

Less affluent institutions in higher education, such as most of those in the community college sector, need to reposition their libraries into the future at a pace that moves as quickly as the technology to support such change allows, without waiting for leadership from larger libraries. They can do so largely within existing budgets as described in the previous scenarios, as long as they have library staff with the vision and the will to shift their budgets and services away from print collections to the provision of digital devices as well as electronic content.

The previous scenarios do not depend on large infusions of new funds but rely on repurposing existing funds and space, working within multi-library groups already in place to share expensive equipment, and redirecting or retraining staff in the ongoing move from print to digital, from repository to learning space. Staff who have processed and loaned books and DVDs might shift to similar activities with equipment, from iPods to e-book readers. They might also provide print-on-demand service. Those involved with cataloging a library's materials will focus on methods to catalog on-the-fly, for example, to generate a record to describe a newly produced print-on-demand book about to be sent out the door with the student whose request just made that book a part of the library's holdings and available for others to use after its return.

Community colleges have long specialized in rapid adoption of new programs to support the retraining of workers throughout their careers and in ever-changing economic conditions. As a result, their libraries are nimble in the regular changes necessary to support this need. In addition, community college librarians may be less set in their ways than many of their peers in other academic and research libraries, many more of whom serve in tenured positions, which can reduce incentive for change. Since much of the necessary technology to make these scenarios real already exists, at least in initial release versions, and because community college librarians in particular have capacity for change and are motivated to regularly justify their value, the future is now. These libraries are perhaps the best prepared among those across all sectors of higher education to apply the rapid cycle change skills necessary to develop libraries of the future. And these libraries will be all the better for being defined by the real world needs of their students and by an institutional mission to provide opportunity to all who choose to enroll at their campuses.

Reference

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