

## **The Opportunity of Invisibility**

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The academic, research library, largely a nineteenth-century creation, grew and flourished for most of the twentieth century. Despite bad times during the Depression of the 1930s, the model thrived until the collections crisis began in the 1980s. Now in the early years of the twenty-first century, academic research libraries are fundamentally challenged. Some imagine a future characterized by slow decay, in which the library is no longer at the heart but at the extremities of the university. Others predict that academic research libraries will cease to exist altogether when all information is digital.

Every academic research library shares the mission and goals of its parent institution, which can be defined broadly as social and intellectual progress through research and learning. In research libraries in the United States, the division of labor has long been faculty conduct research, teach, and publish; students listen, read, and learn; and librarians acquire, organize, preserve, and provide access to the scholarly works mostly created by faculty.

Today, the role of the library in the academy is not so straightforward. Librarians continue to enjoy the respect and regard of most of the communities they serve, but libraries are no longer the undisputed source of credible academic information on campus. The libraries' major technology in the past, the book, is no longer the dominant form of delivering information. Librarians are no longer able to supply information without the cooperation and support of a host of other specialists in information technology. Libraries are increasingly invisible in terms of collections, costs, infrastructure, and, most of all, success. Much of what librarians and libraries do is not apparent to users.

The challenge is increasing invisibility. The causes of our present situation are many, but three forces stand out: radical changes in the scholarly information landscape; rapid, widespread adoption of information technology; and structural changes in the economics of higher education.

The scholarly information crisis began in the 1980s and is exacerbated today by the current global recession. Early on, commercial publishers gained control of scholarly works from universities and learned societies and proceeded to escalate prices rapidly based on increasing per-page costs for reviewing, editing, and marketing, and, probably more important, the desire for higher profits. This is especially the case in fields in which information has a high commercial value—science, medicine, and law. At the same time, the rapidly growing research specializations in universities increased the number of equally specialized journals in which faculty need to publish to receive tenure and the recognition required to secure research funds.

The effect of this consolidation, some might call it monopolization, of scholarly publishing on research library collections is nothing short of catastrophic. Although the rate of price increases has slowed in recent years, the breadth and depth of library collections across the country has decreased. The result is fewer monographs purchased relative to serials and

increasing homogenization of collections. Rising costs force librarians to implement wave after wave of cancellations, which in turn often drives prices higher. The scholarly monograph is now an endangered species. The recent dramatic meltdown in the global economy is creating a kind of hyper version of these trends in a short period of time. The impact on research libraries is obvious. Libraries can no longer hope to provide collections in the fields of institutional strength, let alone the wide variety of information needed by faculty and students.

The rapid growth of digital technology challenges libraries in positive and negative ways. Librarians have always been early adopters of new technologies to enhance services, and digital technologies are no exception. The university community has far better discovery tools—catalog records, abstracts, and indexes—than ever before. They have commercially available search tools, most of which work better for personal retail activities than complex scholarly queries, but they are nevertheless increasingly used. Users have embraced digital technologies and tools for a wide variety of academic purposes, and librarians have been happy to assist.

Although governing boards and trustees in the 1990s were gleeful that digital technologies would mean they never had to spend another dollar on the relentless expansion of library facilities, digital technologies often had the opposite impact on libraries than they anticipated. The use of libraries has grown dramatically with the increasing use of retail techniques, such as comfortable seating, group study rooms, and coffee bars, to bring users into library buildings and the commitment of librarians to make their spaces more lively and inviting for users. The result is a renaissance of beautiful, functional library spaces in facilities all over the country.

Yet, the new tools and technologies, and the services they support, such as data curation services, institutional repositories, multimedia presentation centers, are both marvelous and terrifying. For librarians to be able to support the campus in taking full advantage of these services, robust infrastructure, funds for adding and replacing hardware and software, and constant updating of faculty and staff skills are required. All of these demands put more pressure on the library's finances and constrain its ability to act in support of its user communities.

Other demands on university budgets conflict with the constant pressure libraries face to support new services and technologies. What is not increasing as rapidly as enrollment is the amount of state and federal dollars. In many public universities, the percentage of state support has dwindled while costs and enrollment have risen. In the most dramatic cases, state support is less than 10 percent, and at the same time private universities are increasingly living off endowment income. In recent months all but a rare few universities have seen dramatic drops in state support and significant losses in investment income. It remains to be seen what impact federal stimulus package dollars will have on shoring up research university programs.

Despite the new beauty and enhanced functionality of many new libraries and library spaces, research libraries are increasingly viewed as irrelevant to the academic enterprise. They are often viewed on campus as glorified purchasing agents for paper materials. Some of the faculty perceive that the only time they interact with them in meaningful ways is when they are asked to review lists of journals for cancellation or fight to keep interlibrary service both fast and cheap.

In this environment, libraries are perceived as less central to the academic enterprise than they were in the past. The value they add is less obvious and less understood. They are becoming dangerously invisible. But the threat of invisibility is an urgent wake-up call. Libraries need to take action now before they go the way of newspapers. Academic research libraries will be successful only if they adapt quickly to radically different roles on campus and embrace marketing and promotion of their collections and services. Although this challenge is more acute in science and technology organizations than in those with strong traditions in the humanities, the challenge exists for both.

The new generation of faculty and students do not have the same attachment to the library as previous generations. Often they do not recognize that materials are not only purchased by the library but also made available through sophisticated software tools to make it easier for them to navigate. The new generation works in radically different ways from their older colleagues. They are more dependent on and adept at technology applications specific to their fields. They are generating terabytes of data with little thought or action toward its preservation, even in fields where this data cannot be replicated. They often make do with poor indexing tools because their research community has nothing better to replace them.

There are many hopeful signs that the research library community is rising to the challenge of invisibility. Libraries are changing services, collaborating on new ways of working, getting out into the university community as partners with faculty in creating solutions to their information problems that will help them work more effectively, which is of paramount importance in this world of competition for research dollars and recognition within research communities. Young scholars need all the help they can get and libraries are in a perfect position to assist them.

At the same time, the way to afford new services and the necessary marketing and fundraising is to draw down support for traditional services that are no longer needed or needed by fewer users. This challenge of invisibility requires that library faculty and staff try to see their activities through the eyes of users more than ever before. It is no longer acceptable to assume that they know what users need and want. They need data to make the case.

Libraries have always adapted well to changing circumstances, and today's challenge to increase the value the library adds to the university is no exception. The will to change, the ability to change, the tools needed to change are all in place. What is needed is a sense of urgency and a belief that hard economic times are the best times to focus on priorities and take charge of the future.