

Future Paths for Academic Libraries

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The future of academic libraries will be determined by how they face the challenges of this new era in which they find themselves. They will face a strengthened position or not depending on how they develop and operate new strategies of collaboration.

The budgets of academic libraries are always under pressure, but now they are under severe pressure due to a heightened sense in each community that the library is no longer the dominant player on campus, which it once was. These views may be thoughtful or may be only uninformed opinions. They are nonetheless real. The overall perception of reality by our clients is the reality! This is a problem for library managers, along with the cost of content, which is not moderating, and the drive to achieve “open access,” which is not readily apparent. The lack of a clear identity is a major issue for all libraries when the majority of users believe and act as if the Internet is the viable, and often the only, port of call for their information need. This is not going to change in the coming generations; rather, the effects will be exacerbated. The whole spirit and embodiment of what a library is seen to be has been found in the, often magnificent, physical edifices on our campuses. The dimensions of newly constructed libraries in emerging countries are huge—far larger than their capacity to occupy them or find purpose inside them.

The issue for academic libraries is to convince, through their actions, that they have viable and productive roles to play in the educational and research lives of their universities. Many of our academic colleagues do not believe they need their libraries and are staying away in droves. Many do not even understand that the digital content they access from their desktops is actually provided courtesy of their libraries. Perhaps even if they did know they would not care.

It is no longer easy to say, in an unqualified fashion, that the library is the intellectual heart of the university. The argument no longer resonates with the community in a “prima facie” fashion. As we have moved into the digital world, there have been a number of unintended strategic errors which now limit the library’s capacity to deal with their financial difficulties. There are three to mention here: First, the bundling of large sets of journals from certain publishers has almost made those bundles untouchable, with both library and vendor knowing this. Second, the transfer of the archiving role to publishers has fundamentally altered the library’s importance as the storehouse of information to a community. The publishers have more business models than the library. The only real power still open to libraries is that of the funds they hold and provide to support the community’s lust for information. The final impact is that workforces roll in cycles. The average age of the present academic librarian is drawing close to 60 and to retirement. This poses a difficulty for the library business model in that it is often seen to be the same as it has been for the past 30 years. It is very difficult to foster imagination and innovation into new or additional business models.

All three of these issues pose singly or together major threats to the future of libraries. The future for academic libraries lies in addressing these three issues. The majority of academic libraries can no longer survive separate from their library confreres. They need one another to be

able to provide quality services. They need to work together to find new solutions to their futures. The futures will not all be the same, but there will be common threads. There are good examples of consortia purchasing and operations, but the tough decisions regarding shared collecting and more effective service delivery to one another's clients are not always being made. Indeed many consortia are facing their own crises with major amalgamations occurring. Most libraries protect their physical collections and buildings as their own when there is a reasonable suspicion that there are significant amounts of overlap between other comparable and local collections. Their mission will easily collapse to only supporting undergraduate programs. The creation of a few collaborative storage facilities instead of many storage facilities, for example, would save enormous sums of capital expenditure for their collective institutions. Genuine leadership programs do not find the investment needed to thrive supporting innovative and directive change.

It is ironic that the commitment to "our" collections and independence is still so strong at a time when new metrics of library value are needed to replace volume, title, budget size, and seat counts; when content is "*everywhere*" and the physical library is not the dominant focus of usage; when the vast majority of previously published content is not or is ever likely to be available as "born digital" content. A new paradigm of collaboration is desperately needed, for instance in service provision, in the collective storage of single copies of lesser used materials and in the negotiation of wide area service agreements. Collaboration is paid only lip service at this time. Along with the development of new metrics of library value and identity will come new management styles and behaviors designed to improve performance in a collaborative rather than a single managerial environment. Work patterns will not be hierarchical but lateral; the organisational structure will need to be project focused and flexible, allowing people to work across the library and other professional communities in the university. Staff will have to be empowered by their collective directors to work on projects for the common benefit. New business models will need to be developed but these will draw power or influence from the sum of the parts rather than the parts only.

The challenges facing academic libraries are intrinsically different to that which we have been taught and which we have experienced. The challenges need to be imagined; they need to be totally reconceptualized; they need to be seen from the outside-in rather than inside-out perspective. Only in this way will the profession find new meaning and committed futures.