

Academic Libraries: A Poly-Faced Future

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So much of what we learn while earning library degrees, we forget. However, one piece of information has stayed with me these many years and it continues to play over and over in my mind. The professor who taught my library foundations course said that libraries of all types had a consistency, a sameness about them, a certain order that people could understand and carry with them from one library to another that would help the individual make efficient use of that new library. In other words, no matter what library one would enter, there would be a card catalog, a circulation desk, a reference desk, and, of course, book stacks, journals, newspapers, etc.

I haven't gone back to review today's textbooks in library foundation courses, but it is clear that the old truths do not apply so well anymore. Long gone are the card catalogs, and increasingly we see rows of self-checkout machines rather than library staff members sitting behind the circulation desk. And what about the reference desk—will it soon be a thing of the past? Many articles, particularly in the literature of academic libraries, suggest that it will. So, what will replace these time-honored features that once defined how users functioned within the walls of almost any library? Or will anything at all? A *Bizarro* comic that appeared in my local newspaper, *The Plain Dealer*, on April 1, 2009, features a comic picture of the front of the New York Public Library labeled, "Museum of the Internet, formerly the New York Public Library." My husband handed it to me on the very day I began to write this essay on the future of academic libraries!

It is my observation and opinion that academic libraries are becoming and will continue to become more diverse as they try different approaches to stay relevant on their individual campuses. Rather than each academic library looking the same, they will increasingly seek out the niches that they can fill at their institutions. These niches will vary widely, depending upon the strengths of the individuals and services already existing on their campuses. If the economic climate continues to be depressed in coming years, as it now appears, it will force even more staff reductions in higher education. Thus, there will be a need on the one hand for the institution to look everywhere for talent and skills in places not previously considered, while on the other hand the library will be looking for more ways to insert itself into the lifelines of the institution and provide services that appear, at least on the surface, to be more vital than traditional library services. Let me, then, begin to discuss some of the areas of expertise that libraries and their staff members might have, which a particular campus might seek out and develop in new ways. If I am right, the academic library will have a very rich future in higher education, but it will not be a one-size-fits-all solution.

First, there is no doubt that many magnificent research libraries will continue to function primarily as the institutions that gather, store, and preserve information for scholarly research. Although many print texts have been and will continue to be digitized, unless they were "born digital," there may always be the need for some physical repositories for these materials—and

maybe they will be more museum-like than I want to admit. I believe that some scholars will always want to examine the physical item, which itself may become an object of research. Perhaps this situation will change in the distant future, but I truly believe that it is distant. However, these magnificent research libraries will be relatively stable in number, if not declining, as fewer institutions of higher education seek to enhance their reputation by creating such monuments.

So what about the remaining academic libraries? They will continue to have a selection of all kinds of information resources, including some physical items, but more and more of the materials in use will be digital. It will appear to some university officials that libraries are extraneous to the process of obtaining these virtual materials since they either don't have to be stored on campus or can be stored by the computing center. It is also true that individual academic departments can purchase digital resources for their use and many will do so, not realizing or probably not even caring that these resources could be shared campus-wide if purchased by the library. The wisest of these institutions, however, will listen to their librarians and consolidate purchasing and license negotiations with library acquisitions experts. On many campuses, these library experts will include an intellectual property lawyer and the library will house an office of scholarly communications that may deal with broader campus intellectual property issues as well. A few lawsuits to the detriment of an academic institution now and again may make this approach ubiquitous on most campuses in the future. And, of course, librarians will continue to work collaboratively with colleagues from other institutions to negotiate the best terms and prices for digital resources, continue to find ways of making them easy to use, and continue to promote their use as well as study whether or not they are used.

On other campuses, the amount of space devoted to the library may be reduced as the need to house collections decreases and the space may be repurposed. First of all, library space is probably one of the more flexible spaces on any campus. As book stacks shrink, spaces can be redeveloped for all kinds of uses, from cafés or laboratories to meeting/classroom space or auditorium-like space for groups engaged in such activities as attending guest speaker presentations or events designed to bring many classes together for group learning. Common reading programs, poster sessions, live events, important televised events, and orientation sessions are just a few additional examples of activities that can fit into large, open, flexible spaces. And, of course, in some cases, depending upon how HVAC systems are designed, spaces can be carved up and used to house functions such as archives (if not already part of the library), smaller museum collections, art galleries, etc. Librarians should be actively involved in conversations about repurposing library space to ensure that these new functions are compatible with traditional library functions, especially if these new functions are an integral part of the library's space, i.e., not having direct entrances/exits apart from those of the library. Library administration officers will be recognized as experts in managing large facilities, and these skills will, no doubt, be utilized as campus staffing continues to shrink across the nation. However, these opportunities and changes will vary from campus to campus, creating ever greater differences among academic libraries.

Libraries are known as neutral spaces, as they traditionally serve many constituencies across the campus. This makes the library the perfect place to stage exhibits of all kinds, install institutional artwork, or hold events designed to attract individuals from diverse areas of the

campus. They are also great places for departments to display examples of their work in public areas where those from other parts of the campus are more likely to see them. In other words, the library is a great place to help build campus community around intellectual ideas, hold technology fairs, create faculty commons, do student orientations, hold career fairs, etc. All of these kinds of activities and more will become commonplace in our academic libraries.

Library staff members are wonderfully talented individuals who often not only have specific intellectual interests but are usually generalists as well, displaying broad interest in the academic enterprise. Most value education, and many of them hold degrees in excess of what they actually need to perform their duties. Library deans and/or directors are skilled managers who are good at recognizing undeveloped talent and obtaining continuing education for staff members, following human resource rules and union contracts, staying within budgets, and figuring out how best to use space to meet campus needs. And, most important, they are usually excellent planners. Given these skills, colleges and universities will more aggressively group “orphan” departments under the management of the library director, especially if there are any synergies to be obtained. Thus, over time, libraries will acquire an ever broader range of functions just because talent that can be utilized is waiting in the library—never mind that it may be already fully utilized.

We have seen this trend emerge with the information commons or learning commons movement, where a number of related learning services such as writing centers, reference support, and technology instruction are offered to students and faculty in one space. These success stories may well lead to other successful combinations, or they may come about as happy accidents. In my own organization the university’s independent instructional media services department (which shared walls and access points with the library) experienced the retirement of a director at just the same time that the library was fast expanding its utilization of digital technologies in electronic course reserves and in the creation of a digital image database. With the increasing utilization of digital technologies in multimedia design, the move of interactive video distance learning to voice- and video-over IP, and the similarities between equipment checkout and library materials circulation, this service was placed under the library. Today, it is very difficult to say exactly what is library and what is instructional media. These two areas are increasingly merging and taking advantage of the synergies that have developed, sometimes rather unexpectedly. However, not every library would necessarily have the technology talent on hand to make this kind of merger successful. They will, however, have different talents that the institution can exploit for the overall benefit of the campus.

Therefore, I believe that academic libraries will survive and thrive in the future based upon the unique contributions that they can make to their individual campuses, combining relevant pieces of traditional library services with other functions—a poly-faced future. This will result in vibrant organizations for those who can market the unique skills of the library staff and remain nimble and flexible.