

LIBRARY ISSUES

BRIEFINGS FOR FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATORS

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Vol. 30, No. 4

March 2010

Mission Creep or Strategic Evolution? The Changing Role of Libraries on Academic Campuses

by William Miller and responses by others

Editor's note: In a recent short piece published in Inside Higher Education (www.insidehighered.com, 11/19/09), entitled "Reviving the Academic Library," Johann Neem certainly touched a nerve in many a librarian. However, his views do represent those of some faculty, and while we at LI disagree with his premise, we feel it would be a mistake to simply dismiss his views outright. There are many in the academic world who are raising legitimate questions about the future role of not only campus libraries, but also of other campus units. We believe it is incumbent on librarians to make very clear the ways they can contribute to the education of undergraduates and the research of scholars.

Johann Neem succeeded in riling up librarians and others by complaining that academic libraries have been abandoning their core missions in order to transform themselves into little more than trendy hotspots—"nothing more than computer labs with sofas and coffee." Neem was probably exaggerating for effect, or at least one hopes so, because his thesis is rather preposterous; no academic library has abandoned its most central task, that of acquiring the information that students need for their academic work, and that faculty need for research and teaching. Indeed, quite the opposite is true: academic libraries have been struggling desperately to maintain their subscriptions and book purchases in the face of declining budgets and inflation in the cost of the resources, during one of the most severe economic downturns of the past 100 years.

To Neem, "the library is a means to an end, enabling students and faculty to access archives," and nothing more. He is apparently not aware of the change in student learning preferences, which makes the library, with its group workspaces and yes, amenities such as coffee, a place conducive to current student

learning styles and, indeed, for many students the library is the preferred location to interact with fellow students.

Where and How Students Learn

In Neem's limited view, learning takes place only in the classroom, and the library has no role in learning other than to provide the raw materials. However, students frequently learn from each other, and learn as well from interaction with the wider world of information, which librarians as intermediaries can help them to discover. In an ideal world, in which students were born knowing how to conduct research and comprehend abstruse scholarship, perhaps the library could serve its primary purpose simply by being a passive repository.

The reality, however, is that librarians must act as intermediaries, especially for students, to help them find and interpret the resources that we acquire on their behalf. Students tend to have a much higher opinion of their search ability than is warranted, especially because many academic resources are available only within libraries' proprietary resources rather than on the open Internet. If we do not aggres-

sively embrace that instructional role, the result is a predictable reliance on Google as the alpha and omega of student research effort, and the resulting product is often not acceptable to faculty.

The Role of the Contemporary Academic Library

Neem's article does lead to an interesting question however: just what is the appropriate role of the contemporary academic library? What should its mission be? The obvious answer is that it should support the mission and goals of its parent institution. In the case of my own university, the institution's mission is to "promote academic and personal development, discovery and lifelong learning." Such goals can only be achieved in a wider environment than exists exclusively in the classroom. In the case of lifelong learning, obviously, the classroom will eventually cease to exist for our students, and they need to be "taught to fish"—i.e., be empowered to be independent learners and researchers, not just empty vessels to be filled by faculty inculcation at a fixed point in time.

Variety of goals. More broadly, my own institution has a set of goals that include such matters as meeting community needs, building the information-technology environment, and increasing the university's visibility locally, regionally, and nationally.

The classroom, in isolation, cannot do much to address such goals. Libraries' resources, not only in books but also in such formats as musical scores, rare maps, and unique manuscripts, can be marshaled in support of such broader goals through exhibits, lectures, consultancies, and performances which enhance institutional prestige and public support.

My particular library has an ensemble-in-residence, which performs concerts and interprets music from our collections for both the university and the surrounding community, thus helping to fulfill

these broader institutional goals in a way that we are uniquely positioned to provide.

Electronic resources. As the world continues to change, libraries are helping their institutions to change with it, in concert with computing/information services, development offices, and other areas of the institution. The advent of electronic resources has complicated the process of finding resources considerably, and caused many institutions to add information literacy to the list of outcomes they expect students to possess. Academic libraries are the primary agents on campus for such instruction in the use of electronic resources, following a decades-long trend in which academic libraries have increasingly added instruction in the use of scholarly resources to their core set of responsibilities.

New models in publication. Changes in scholarly communication have also made libraries partners with those advocating new models in publication, not only in terms of changing the unsustainable commercial model in favor of less onerous non-commercial ones, but also including a role for libraries as publishers themselves—libraries at various universities are amalgamating with university presses, becoming publishers of digital resources (such as Columbia's CIAO), and creating digital repositories that include a wide variety of materials—everything from institutional dissertations to faculty publications, digitized campus cultural events and lectures, rare books, and unique archival materials which the libraries have converted to digital form for broader scholarly access.

Changing with the Times

Regarding academic libraries, therefore, it appears that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in Dr. Neem's philosophy. Yes, it remains crucial that we acquire the books and journal articles that students and scholars need, but the mission does not simply end there. Conditions have changed

and as they continue to do so, in areas from copyright to scholarly communication to electronic scholarship, academic libraries would be remiss not to change with the times.

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Response from...

**Brinley Franklin, Vice Provost,
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Johann Neem's view is that academic libraries have lost their way in serving faculty and students and that "what libraries need to do...is to revive the academic library's traditional mission." This mission, in his opinion, is "enabling students and faculty to access archives."

This quaint synopsis of a contemporary academic library's mission ignores the evolving nature of modern information, where "archives" are increasingly born-digital, licensed rather than purchased, and subject to legal interpretations as to what kinds of "access" can be offered to students and faculty. For many academic libraries, one of our new roles is making physical collections accessible digitally that historians like Dr. Neem traditionally had to travel great distances to access as physical objects.

Equally quaint is Neem's insistence that "the classroom is where students connect, collaborate, learn, and synthesize, under the guidance of faculty who are, at the end of the day, responsible for teaching."

As I survey what is taking place in contemporary academic libraries (and obviously outside the classroom), I see a lot of connecting, collaborating, learning, and synthesizing taking place. Ironically, many students are currently utilizing academic libraries and especially our learning commons to advance the writing, quantitative, technological and research skills that they are not sufficiently acquiring in our classrooms alone.

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Response from...

*Suzanne Thorin, Dean
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I am surprised that Professor Neem believes that academic libraries have reached a state where they need to be resuscitated. Here at Syracuse University, where library use has tripled in the past few years, concerned undergraduates garnered more than 1,000 signatures in two days last semester to keep books—yes, print books—from being moved offsite.

In a collective action, the undergraduates joined with graduate students and faculty and together they demanded increased space for collections on the campus and more intellectual convening places in the libraries. I will argue that more faculty and students than ever before are articulate about and even passionate in expressing their research needs to library personnel.

Knowledge Commons

Elinor Ostrom, recent recipient of the Nobel Prize, has studied shared natural resources, such as forests, water, and wildlife, as commons that need effective community governance to be sustainable. In her most recent book,¹ she investigates knowledge as a commons, another shared resource and one that includes libraries.

If we view the library as a knowledge commons, that is, a resource shared by a group of people, who sometimes have competing needs, our challenge is to govern the library so that the diverse individuals in the group are heard and their needs addressed. Thus, the argument is not about the primacy of the professor and the classroom or whether the library is a means to an end, as Professor Neem writes, but rather if the library has adequate resources—collections, spaces, personnel—and uses them wisely and in keeping with the needs of the community.

Being on the Same Team

The academy has been described as a group of stovepipes, occupied by individuals and small disciplinary groups who do not always communicate with one another or with the library. When these sundry groups cohere in their thinking and have the will to act collectively, as they have recently at Syracuse, I think we need to celebrate and respond to their kind—and sometimes not so kind—attention.

For example, library/faculty meetings that had been postponed repeatedly by the faculty have now become a priority. I, as well as many librarians here, have been overwhelmed by the willingness of faculty members to discuss their research, research needs, and ways they use the library and its resources.

Faculty, students, and librarians need to work together to increase the excellence of the library. Put another way: we are on the same team.

¹Elinor Ostrom and Charlotte Hess, eds. *Understanding Knowledge as a Commons*. MIT Press 2007.

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Response from...

*Joanne A. Schneider,
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Professor Neem reveals a profound historical misunderstanding by overlooking the central cause of the evolution of the mission of academic libraries. His limited “library as archive” perspective leads to his advancing negative reasons for changes in library services and space, such as budgetary constraints, self-interest of library leaders, or benign neglect.

On many campuses, including Colgate University, however, this evolution has taken place through a collaborative process that engages major campus stakeholders. In most cases, the extent to which an evolved mission has resulted in the transformation in library space is reflective

of the institution’s strategic goals and objectives to enhance undergraduate student engagement. Yet, while the ways in which the library’s mission may be expressed have grown, core values devoted to archiving information and supporting students and faculty have not been altered.

Although Professor Neem focuses on the current economic crisis in his analysis, the real tipping point for the transformation of both library services and facilities at Colgate University occurred some dozen years ago. While growing physical collections taxed building space, new technologies were requiring the university to contemplate the changes involving information access, dissemination, and technology—and their concomitant impact on both professorial pedagogy and student cognitive styles. Within this environment, the library became the epicenter for the impact of information technology on higher education.

The Library: More Than a Physical Structure

Fortunately, a committee of enlightened campus stakeholders—faculty, students, administrators, librarians, technologists, and trustees—reached consensus on an expanded institutional vision for the library’s mission that defined the “library” as an intellectual concept as well as a physical structure. The committee determined that the way to realize this new strategic institutional vision was to undertake a major renovation and building addition project.

The resulting Case Library and Geyer Center for Information Technology (Case-Geyer), was envisioned by campus stakeholders to provide “one stop shopping for information” as Colgate students and faculty took advantage of the latest developments in scholarly information and technologies.

Collections remained important, with the construction of an innovative automated storage and retrieval system (ASRS) in the building for lesser-used materials. This was

leveraged against the need to house new technologies and the technologists with expertise in their use as intrinsic to support for faculty and students.

Social Space — a locus for learning. In response to expectations of faculty and students for the library to bridge the paradigm shift between physical and digital knowledge, Case-Geyer provides a range of spaces for solitary and collaborative research projects that include the creation, capture, and manipulation of new media. Moreover, the new library has become the common and cost-effective locus for student learning that takes place outside the classroom through informal interaction among students, faculty, and staff. This was facilitated by creating a social space—including sofas and coffee! — to promote intellectual exchange.

The stats don't lie. The result of this collaborative transformation stands in sharp contrast to the negative stereotype decried by Neem. In the two years since Case-Geyer opened in early 2007, students have voted with their feet and their library barcodes. The building's attendance rate has increased dramatically (83 percent in 2008-2009) over that of the old building. At night and on weekends, study areas are so packed that students are sitting with their laptops on the floor.

The numbers of books and other materials checked out from the collection along with items borrowed from other libraries have increased by 24 percent and 27.5 percent respectively.

Librarian – Faculty Collaboration Increases

In response to faculty requests to utilize new media and technologies to enhance teaching and learning, teams of librarians and technologists collaborate with professors and students on curricular projects involving research-based podcasts posted to iTunes, videos on YouTube, and posters that adhere to best practices for the incorporation of narrative, images, and data.

Requests for team-led instruction has expanded from three sessions requested five years ago to forty-five sessions scheduled in 2008-2009. In assessment interviews, students have reported that the prospect of their research projects being made available to the world, not to mention to their parents and friends, on Web 2.0 sites resulted in their investing more time and working much harder than if they were writing papers read only by their professor.

Faculty members have noted that in writing a podcast script to try to connect with other people, students are more motivated by their research and that their understanding has been enhanced of their own as well as their classmates topics.

As Colgate hires new faculty who were “born digital,” we expect faculty interest in media-based student research to increase exponentially. As a result, in the midst of an economic downturn that has affected Colgate like so many other academic institutions, university leadership decided in January 2010 to pursue a proposal made by librarians, technolo-

gists, and faculty to convert an unfinished space in Case-Geyer into a dedicated center for faculty, students, librarians, and technologists to concentrate on media creation and manipulation. Leaders at Colgate clearly are convinced that these new services cannot be “provided cheaper and better by student unions, residential halls, athletic centers, computer labs and coffee shops” as Neem posits.

Libraries Standing at the Forefront of Academic Scholarship

In short, Colgate's academic library has fulfilled the original vision for the facility as stated in the institution's Strategic Plan—that “a great university library must be more than a warehouse of texts and a place for quiet study. It stands as the dynamic intellectual center of the campus where new knowledge is created every day.”

Misconceptions regarding the core mission of the academic library should not be allowed to obscure the fact that many library leaders have positioned their organizations as important observation posts for studying how students really learn while engaging campus stakeholders to reach a shared, purposeful vision that actually aligns with both traditional and emerging modes of academic scholarship and learning.

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Library Issues: Briefings for Faculty and Administrators (ISSN 0734-3035) is published bimonthly beginning September 1980 by Mountainside Publishing Co., Inc., 321 S. Main St., #213, Ann Arbor, MI 48104; (734) 662-3925. **Library Issues**, Vol. 30, no.4, ©2010 by Mountainside Publishing Co., Inc. Subscriptions: \$80/one year; \$140/two years. Additional subscriptions to same address \$25 each/year. Address all correspondence to **Library Issues, P.O. Box 8330, Ann Arbor, MI 48107**. (Fax: 734-662-4450; E-mail: sales@libraryissues.com) Subscribers have permission to photocopy articles free of charge for distribution on their own campus. Library Issues is available online with a password or IP access at <<http://www.LibraryIssues.com>>