

# LIBRARY ISSUES

## BRIEFINGS FOR FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATORS

Editors: Ann P. Dougherty, *Mountainside Publishing*; Richard M. Dougherty, *University of Michigan, Emeritus*

Contributing Editors: William Miller, *Florida Atlantic University*; Barbara Fister, *Gustavus Adolphus College*;

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### The Role of Campus Administrators as Libraries Face the Latest Economic Downturn

By William Miller

The current economic downturn was widely expected, in 2008-09, to be nothing more than a memory by 2011. Now, as we close out the calendar year 2010, 2011 looks to be a terrible year for higher education financially, and 2012 to 2014 doesn't look all that much better. Stimulus money is running out and federal spending will not bail out states and institutions again. Endowments have been hit hard and have only partially recovered. Students are finding it harder and harder to pay rapidly increasing tuitions; job growth is slow, foreclosures are increasing, and local and state governments are raising property taxes while still reducing services as their revenues fall, limiting their ability to support institutions of higher education.

#### Why Libraries are Vulnerable

During such a period of constraint, academic libraries are vulnerable. Among other things, someone forgot to tell publishers to lower their prices, or even keep them the same; journal prices are expected to increase 4-6 percent this year, as usual, and printed book prices are at best stable. All this at a time when library budgets for materials are falling, or at best remaining stagnant. The world of academic journal publishing remains a monopolistic, non-competitive system, in which an ever-decreasing number of ever-larger publishing houses control the recognized, accepted vehicles of scholarly communication, and continue to hold academic libraries hostage.

Academic libraries continue to be labor-intensive cost-centers which do not generate enrollment dollars directly, and they are undoubtedly expensive to maintain. Library costs may therefore

appear to some to be a frill or non-essential which can be deferred during difficult times, especially if one were to buy into the mistaken notion that all information is now free, or shortly will be, or the other equally mistaken notion that students are not using libraries anymore. At a time when building maintenance and IT infrastructure needs cannot be fully addressed, academic programs (and even a few sports programs) are being cut, and institutions are being encouraged to think the unthinkable, surely campus administrators can be forgiven for hoping to put off worrying about library needs for the next few difficult years?

Information costs, however, cannot be easily ignored or dispensed with, for institutions serious about research and scholarship. While some information is free online, in a somewhat hit or miss fashion, most scholarly information is not free, far from it, and even Google is planning to start charging for its "books" database (which it obtained free of charge from libraries, except for the costs of digitization).

Ultimately, there is no such thing as a free lunch for libraries and their institutions, though there may be cheaper lunches to be had. Nor is the overall physical library passé, even though most library functions can now be conducted online. There still needs to be a cadre of professionals who do all the things that make such access possible, both to

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the legacy physical collections and to the new online materials. And the building itself serves a multiplicity of functions in most institutions. It has become the desired “third space,” academic and social but neither the classroom nor the dorm room, where students prefer to study, work in groups, read, and socialize. It is often the home of other ancillary student support services like writing centers and technology assistance which increasingly join the more traditional library functions such as access to printed materials and reference and research assistance. For the average undergraduate, the library is the true computer center, offering more machines, along with quality assistance, than any other place on campus.

### What's a Campus Administrator to Do in the Short Run?

In the short run, there is not that much that the average campus administrator can do about library funding except to apply band-aids or insist on a radical rethinking of priorities and expenditures. Library funding problems are of a piece with higher education's overall funding problems. Libraries are labor-intensive operations, but so are English departments. The expensive science journal's cost pales in comparison to the equipment set-up costs for a new Chemistry professor. The library, therefore, is just like every other area within an institution, one more baby bird in the nest, crying to be fed, and the mother bird can do little, in the short run, beyond distributing whatever food is available, more or less equally. Campus administrators will not normally be in a position simply to throw money at the problem in order to resolve it.

**New paradigms needed.** Times of crisis, however, can be good times to initiate new paradigms. Academic libraries have been caught in the “cost-plus” paradigm for a long while, and this mode of operation is based on what is increasingly clearly an erroneous assumption: that lean times like this are just an interruption to be endured until the fat times recur. If the fat times do not recur, however, our present mode of operation is not ultimately sustainable. Like every other area within the

institution, libraries need to rethink everyday operations with an eye towards streamlining, and a willingness to jettison those things which are dear to one's heart but not necessarily cost-effective. Is there a radically new way to do something like reference desk staffing, collection development, or technical processing? Richard Dougherty, in his book *Streamlining Library Services*, offers various approaches that can be employed in order to rethink and evaluate library activities.<sup>1</sup>

Campus administrators have every reason to insist that libraries, like academic departments and administrative areas, do all they can to solve their own problems, including rethinking their missions, as well as their practices (though, of course, the library's mission is dependent upon that of the overall institution). Everyone will be tightening his or her belt over the next few years, and libraries are no exception. Everything needs to be examined, from staffing to maintenance contracts to library materials subscriptions and use patterns. If triage becomes necessary, libraries should be prepared with a prioritized list, and already know what changes would be made, should they be necessary.

**Empowering and supporting libraries.** Administrators can help with short-run change by empowering libraries to handle their own needs and maximize their flexibility to use funding effectively. Libraries should be freed from constraints which handcuff them, such as personnel rules which protect poor performers, and automatic surrender of salary dollars when a staff member leaves. Libraries should be able to prepay where advantageous, negotiate multi-year deals, and carry over year-end funds. Libraries should also be allowed to repurpose freed-up salary dollars as necessary, either to augment the salaries of key staff, to retain those whose work is crucial to the smooth functioning of the system as the staff shrinks, or to provide support for new technology initiatives.

In a serious reexamination of priorities, there can be little room for sacred cows, or things which we see as

desirable but know in our heart of hearts are not very effective or central to the core mission. What are the institution's priorities? How directly do the library's activities support these priorities? How many people are being served by each library program or activity? It is tempting to cut the most obvious things, such as library hours, but such cuts, while they might ultimately be necessary, may also be steps which enable administrators to avoid more difficult choices, though ultimately better ones.

Once all activities are ranked, campus administrators can again help by supporting and empowering libraries to take the steps necessary to eliminate the least effective ones, which may include personnel decisions. Too often, institutional or governmental regulations will prevent the most effective and obvious solutions from being implemented. We know this in advance, but the pursuit of perfection should not hinder us from implementing that which actually can be changed.

### The Role of Technology

Technology is too often touted as a panacea, without a clear or specific understanding of what particular technologies can or cannot do, at present, or a notion of what the true cost of implementing new technologies actually is. Nevertheless, there clearly are some new technologies and new approaches which could be key to reducing costs. For instance, given that the average academic book now costs more than \$80 in paper, perhaps patron-driven selection of e-books (most of which are cheaper than print books) would result in a more targeted collection that sees a high degree of use at a much lower cost.

The traditional model of collection development was based on having librarians select titles on the heuristic assumption that they will be useful, though the majority of them, we know from experience, will receive perhaps only one or two uses within a decade. Perhaps books purchased in this new way could also be accompanied by their own metadata, automatically downloaded into the library's catalog instead of being cataloged by staff on an individual basis.

The short-term problem with introducing new technology is that it will almost always cost money or considerable staff time (or both) to implement, so an investment up front must be made. A self-checkout machine will cost \$15,000 to \$20,000, though over its life it may do the work of staff who would have cost considerably more than that in salary and benefits. New software solutions and programming will require highly specialized staff who command a salary commensurate with their knowledge and ability. To reduce this all to a cliché, it takes money to make money, and institutions must be willing to invest in order to have the flexibility and capacity to innovate and take advantage of new developments as they arise.

Technology is changing so quickly that things which seemed far-fetched or unimaginable not long ago are rapidly becoming possible. It is also possible, however, to go very far off the rails; technology can be very expensive and yield very little, as universities which have implemented inferior financial and other systems know all too well, so it should not be regarded as a cure-all. Nevertheless, there are many instances in libraries today where technologies such as new web-scale discovery systems, and self-use software for everything from interlibrary loan requests to instructional tutorials to online journal article delivery, are saving labor and making libraries more efficient.

However, technology will probably never eliminate the need for a core of highly competent individuals who will become more essential than ever in keeping our ever-more-technologically-dependent libraries running properly. Systems must be kept functioning, problems need to be resolved, and innovations overseen and maintained. The student who has a reference question in his or her dorm room at 3:00 A.M. can now have that question answered by a librarian in another country, through our cooperative online reference systems, but reference librarians at the home institution must still return the favor for the chat-reference cooperative to work.

All in all, technology raises the stakes considerably for libraries; when

a book is missing, only one book is missing, but when an online catalog malfunctions, all books are missing, effectively speaking, and when materials are difficult to discover, then the institution is wasting money on materials that will go unused. Once we are dependent on technology, we cannot easily go back.

### Looking at the Longer Term

Libraries are evolving very quickly, and indeed the word “library” is hardly adequate anymore to describe what is going on in these institutions; “laboratory” might be a more descriptive term. The books are still there, but so are the computers, the collaborative work spaces, the lectures, the exhibits, the instructional spaces, the writing centers, the handheld mobile device-equipped librarians responding to information needs posed both from inside the building and outside of it. The academic library today which does not have a “learning commons,” by whatever local name it is given, is the exception rather than the rule. Libraries are the preferred study space on campus, and all of the academic libraries which I have visited of late are overflowing with students eager to take advantage of all the facility can offer, from reference assistance to printing the information resources they discover to receiving help in formatting the results of their work.

**Traditional activities.** The mission is broadening and deepening, but as it changes, the traditional activities such as the warehouse function and the round-the-clock, in-person reference service, while still there and still important, are no longer the prime functions they once were. With the passage of another decade or two, run-of-the-mill books may be available online (though at a cost) to such an extent that institutions can recover much of the library’s space for other functions (or use compact storage facilities, either inside the library or at a distance, to accomplish the same thing). More and more services can undoubtedly be automated, including some of our more labor-intensive functions such as reference assistance and circulation functions. Changes like this will not be welcome news to many, especially among the faculty, and

campus administrators can help ease this transition by supporting libraries in their evolution.

**Changes needed to scholarly publishing paradigm.** Campus administrators could be most helpful to libraries in the long run, however, by supporting the movement to a new paradigm for scholarly publication. The notion that journal costs for titles essential for faculty research and promotion/tenure will inflate each year by 5 percent, more or less, and that libraries can do nothing about this except scrounge and beg for money to pay the ransom while the collection shrinks as the costs rise is, quite simply, unsustainable in the long term, and at this point, even in the shorter term. It is what mathematicians call a runaway formula, and it is rapidly reaching a point of no return at which time libraries will subscribe to ever fewer titles, to the increasing howls of those whose journals are jettisoned, and strip the cupboard bare to continue to do so until it ultimately becomes impossible to sustain the effort. This dilemma is driven in large part by the promotion and tenure process. In this matter, librarians are fairly helpless, caught between the Scylla of faculty demand on the one hand and the Charybdis of commercial publishers’ greed on the other, and we need higher levels of campus administration to intervene. The answer is not to pony up ever more money; it is to find a new way, but librarians cannot operate alone to initiate radical change in the system of scholarly communication.

Faculty and institutional leaders can help initiate new systems of communication and mediate a radical change for the better. New modes of acceptable scholarly communication need to be created, and validated by institutions as approved avenues for promotion and tenure. Surely technology can enable institutions to come together and create such networks. Models such as the arXiv preprint open-access repository for certain scientific disciplines clearly point the way and show that academics can come together to disseminate information in ways that do not break the bank for libraries and their institutions. Other

new models, such as open-access journals, can also be supported by institutions, and institutions can also encourage open-access publishing for their faculty, as Harvard has with its DASH—Digital Access to Scholarship at Harvard—initiative, through which faculty give the institution a non-exclusive right to provide access to their work.

#### **Institutional Repositories.**

Libraries can greatly assist in this process through their institutional repositories, digital archives which can house faculty work in addition to the dissertations produced at the institution, archival materials, out-of-copyright works, and other materials that libraries have now been digitizing in great number. It would be unusual at this point for an academic library of any size not to have its own digitization unit, and libraries are constantly encouraging faculty to contribute papers and other material, including audio-visual materials, to the institutional repository, which makes all of this material part of the library's online system of materials which students and faculty (anywhere, not just locally) can now discover and use. Institutional repositories could serve as the platform for faculty publication and communication, if some external repository system is not created.

#### **Campus leadership needed.**

To bring such a new system about, however, there would have to be fundamental changes in the promotion and tenure system which is now dependent upon the vehicles of scholarly exchange (journals) that commercial publishers have

fostered, including prestigious titles which professional associations sold off to commercial publishers in recent decades, for short-term gain which shifted the cost from the associations to the academic institutions via their libraries. Libraries have tried to bring competition to the marketplace by creating lower-cost journals, through Project SPARC, to compete head-to-head with the commercial publishers, but this endeavor has had only limited success. To bring about fundamental change, a system of online publication through which faculty can share their research without paying page charges or enabling commercial publishers to hit academic libraries with ever-increasing costs will require leadership from the highest reaches of many campuses, working in concert with faculty to bring it about.

#### **Next Steps**

Librarians and campus administrators need to take action immediately to address both short and longer-term solutions to the problem of adequate library support. Early action should include rethinking of the mission, and making sure that all of the library's activities actively contribute to meeting it. All aspects of library business practice, from contracts to staffing to technical processing, should be reexamined and rethought. Libraries can think about new sources of non-institutional revenue also, such as grants and contract work, but these will rarely be significant enough to have any effect on the long-term structural problems, and gifts would have to be of an extraordinary magnitude to offer any real structural relief.

Libraries must communicate their situation to faculty and other campus leaders, and seek a new level of sustainable activity. There is much that libraries can do to serve their institutions without major new expenditures: libraries can be the place where students receive individual help of high quality in their academic endeavors. Many libraries are innovating, through such initiatives as assigning personal librarians to new students, and fostering a collaborative environment featuring new kinds of computing, editing, and multi-media approaches to learning.

For maximum success, however, the support of campus administrators will be absolutely essential. Particularly welcome would be a new level of campus leadership regarding scholarly communication so that libraries can continue to provide what students and scholars need without breaking the bank. Such change would free up libraries to focus more on their innovation and support of scholarly activity instead of endlessly worrying about where the next dollar will come from for maintenance of subscriptions. Perhaps it will also free campus administrators from the uneasy feeling that their libraries are being underfunded, and that there is little to be done about it. W.M. <[miller@fau.edu](mailto:miller@fau.edu)>

#### **References**

1. Richard M. Dougherty, *Streamlining Library Services: What we do, How much time it takes, What it costs, and How we can do it better*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008.



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