

LIBRARY ISSUES

BRIEFINGS FOR FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATORS

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The Great Age of Experimentation: What's Good for Higher Ed Is Good for Academic Libraries

By Steven Bell

A frequently referenced quote states that what is good for General Motors is good for America. What General Motors CEO Charles Wilson actually said in 1953 is that he thought what was good for the country was good for General Motors and vice versa. The same might be said of the higher education enterprise, the academic librarians who serve it and library deans and academic administrators who work collaboratively to lead their institutions. It is particularly salient now when higher education is shifting, after many decades of slow, incremental change to a phase of rapid, highly experimental change.

Jeff Selingo, writing for the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (January 13, 2014), attempts to capture the essence of this transition when he observes that higher education is currently in an "evolutionary moment." Massive, free online courses, competency-based degrees, adaptive learning, and hybrid learning are all experiments and they will all encounter failures. Selingo acknowledges it, but states that "without these early experiments, we can't ever evolve to what comes next."

In this new era of experimentation, academic administrators should look to their librarians to adopt the same spirit of experimentation. It is already underway, and with it comes a new sense of excitement in the library. Library and academic administrators will want to examine how they can collaboratively develop a new culture of experimentation to achieve new successes and occasional failures. Library organizations seeking to shift their culture to one that encourages and supports experimentation could face a number of hurdles. Whether it's an administration stuck in neutral, staff in need of motivation or train-

ing, budgetary constraints or a current culture that defends the status quo, the provost should be raising expectations for the campus library to demonstrate its capacity for creating new solutions and services that promote institutional innovation.

None of this is to suggest a new call for change for the sake of change. Owing to budgetary pressures, demographic shift in the coming decade, greater competition for research funding and heightened governmental pressure to increase graduation rates, every college and university, even the most elite, envisions a near-term future in which new ideas, new strategies and new models of educational delivery are at a premium. This issue is a call for library leaders and academic administrators to rethink how the academic library could be an engine of experimentation that is well adapted to support institutional change. That means reinventing the library so that it both stimulates internal efforts to try new things and complements all other campus constituencies as they forge a path into this great age of experimentation.

Accelerating Pace of Change

When the term Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) was hardly known to most individuals, Sebastian Thrun, an ex-Stanford professor and Google scientist, appeared at the WIRED Business Conference in May 2012. In explaining his new higher education venture, Udacity, he made this

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now well-known bold claim: in 50 years there will be only 10 higher education institutions. Within a year, in addition to Thrun's own Udacity, there were two other high profile MOOC platforms, Coursera and EduX. Together all three were adding and delivering free online learning to hundreds of thousands of students. Owing to mass experimentation in higher education, MOOCs went from obscurity to *The New York Times* declaring 2013 as the Year of the MOOC.

In response to the MOOC explosion, academic librarians questioned how faculty and students in these new learning platforms might require access to resources and services. How would libraries operate in this learning environment?

The sudden eruption of articles, presentations and symposia about libraries and MOOCs did contribute to our understanding of MOOCs, but ultimately led to more questions with mostly speculative answers. Librarians conducted personal experiments by enrolling in MOOCs. At least one academic library offered a MOOC. "What are some concrete examples of how academic libraries can help with MOOCs?", asked Mike Eisenberg during his ALCTS webinar on "MOOCs and Libraries" in September 2013.

Academic librarians could help faculty with copyright issues, create course-specific research guides, assist in locating open educational resources or instructional support materials such as tutorials. Beyond those few applications academic librarians struggled for ways to connect with MOOC learners. Things quickly changed again.

By the end of 2013 Thrun's bold predication proved more bluster than reality. In a highly publicized interview he referred to MOOCs as a lousy product, and Udacity shifted direction to commercial, rather than higher education, pursuits. MOOC critics simultaneously shouted "I told you so," but none could deny that MOOCs, still prospering at multiple institutions, changed everything.

There was no revolution, but it propelled a new spirit of experimentation in higher education. Academic librarians responded to MOOCs, driven as

much by a fear of missing out as by a desire to experiment themselves. New experimentation in higher education is where the opportunity is found and attention must be paid.

Competency-based degree programs, for example, where higher education experimentation is growing, has so far received little attention from academic librarians. Yet, even more so than MOOCs, these alternate-track programs to degree completion raise questions about how to reach and serve students who receive credit for outside-the-class learning experience. It equates to even less exposure to the academic library.

As competency-based learning options expand, academic librarians may need to develop their own programs where students can achieve competency credits for research mastery. Other institutions are experimenting with digital badging systems that allow students to earn credit when they achieve learning objectives and then display their badges in electronic portfolios. These are new areas rich for experimentation by academic librarians, and the pace of change will only accelerate. Are we up to the task?

Signs of Experimentation

What exactly does it mean to conduct an experiment in a library setting? Too often it's associated with the "BHAG" (Big Hairy Audacious Goal). From that perspective, experimentation may be quickly quashed for being too outlandish, costly or time consuming – all with a high degree of potential failure. Our sense of experimentation should be more inclusive than just far-reaching and radically different projects that stretch the library beyond any previous limit.

Our spectrum of what counts as experimentation should be broad enough to encompass everything from the basic to the bombastic. Originality is desirable but not mandatory. Librarians should aim to break their own mold. Successful implementations or shocking failures achieved by other librarians are of less consequence. What matters is each academic library's attempt to move beyond its comfort zone, resulting in some potential new discovery.

New Types of Learning Spaces.

At Virginia Tech's Newman Library they are experimenting with new types of learning spaces. The SCALE-UP (Student-Centered-Active-Learning-Environment for Undergraduate Programs) Project seeks to offer and explore the impact of a highly collaborative, hands-on, computer-rich, interactive learning space for large enrollment courses. Classroom spaces are found within academic libraries, but SCALE-UP offers instructors and learners vast capacity for interaction with the room technology and each other.

This experiment tests more than multipurpose, flexible learning spaces in libraries. It explores how collaborative relationships with faculty, for supporting student learning, may be best achieved. Newman Library will eventually undergo a multi-million dollar renovation project, but rather than wait until the work is complete, they already own a variety of study chairs, tables, monitors and other furniture with which to experiment. In the spirit of experimentation, the library study spaces are now labs designed to test what works or fails. Other libraries offer similarly designed learning spaces and collaborative learning furniture. For Newman Library's staff, faculty and students, it's a first-time experiment.

Creative Environment. Other library experiments can be more individual and radical. Virginia Tech's Associate Dean for Learning & Outreach, Brian Matthews, is currently experimenting with Google Glass, and exploring how wearable technology might be useful to librarians. Two things help Newman Library to foster a culture of experimentation.

First, Virginia Tech's institutional motto is "Invent the Future." An entrepreneurial, innovation environment is infused throughout the campus, which features a local start-up incubator.

Second, Virginia Tech Libraries Dean Tyler Walters encourages staff to experiment, and he leads by example with his personal involvement in previously untried projects such as the Library Publishing Coalition, a collaboration in which academic libraries are joining

together to bring innovative publishing solutions to higher education

Publishing Opportunities. Publishing is another opportunistic space ripe for experimentation by academic librarians. In a widely publicized experiment, the library at Amherst College started an independent press committed to publishing open access scholarly monographs, something previously untried by a four-year liberal arts college. That has inspired librarians at similar institutions to explore the possibilities.

While no actual experiments have yet begun, the Oberlin Group of Libraries has started an initiative called “Lever” to explore the feasibility of a collaborative library-publishing venture to produce high quality, freely available scholarship in the liberal arts. Others are experimenting with textbooks, and the role the library can play to support faculty use and authoring of openly accessible textbooks.

The librarians at SUNY Geneseo spearheaded an initiative known as Open SUNY Textbooks that incentivizes and supports SUNY faculty to publish open textbooks. This experiment has already yielded four open textbooks with more on the way.

Delivering Services. Another hospitable space for experimentation is delivering information and education services. Academic librarians are exploring new theories of learning, and experimentally applying them in the classroom. In advance of the Association of College & Research Libraries revision of its long-standing information literacy standards, which will introduce a framework based on new approaches to learning, primarily threshold concepts and metaliteracy, academic librarians are already conducting experiments that introduce these new methods into their instruction. Every year more academic libraries are hosting experiments in outreach and service models that seek to move beyond the delivery of reference and access services at separate, place bound desks. To improve the library experience, librarians are testing collaborations between the reference

and access services unit, with other academic support services and in moving from subject to functional specialties (e.g., the “humanities librarian” versus the “user experience librarian”).

Even experiments launched years ago can benefit when librarians push the boundaries even farther. At the Odegaard Undergraduate Library at the University of Washington, a new renovation featured a combined Writing and Research Center (OWRC). Though the Writing Center was previously co-located in the library, somewhat experimental at the time, the two groups were physically separated and worked independently. In the new OWRC, both staffs decided to experiment by moving to one space where students receive collaborative support for research and writing projects. Though uncertain about how well this approach would work, the two groups decided it was an experiment worth undertaking. What these projects share is a culture that creates a safe and supportive environment for experimentation.

Creating the Culture

What can a library director or administrator do to instill the spirit of experimentation in the library organization? To begin, it requires an accurate assessment of staff readiness to engage with new possibilities and their comfort level with the inherent risk taking of experimentation. Forcing a new culture of experimentation on the organization from the administrative suite is unlikely to produce staff engagement. As an initial step, library directors and provosts can demonstrate their own personal openness to experimentation. That can manifest itself in a project led from the top, but which encourages staff to actively participate. Library directors must also strategically hire new staff, when the opportunity arises, who will fit into a culture of experimentation and make it comfortable for other staff to do so.

Too many academic librarians who want to engage in experimentation readily share stories about administrators and colleagues who offer either little support or outright hostility. Their proposed experiments wither as ideas

on the vine and eventually die. This is a culture-shift killer that administrators must confront. If the roadblock is the library director, the provost may need to intervene and create the opportunities a new culture of experimentation needs to thrive. Provosts, for example, can create special initiative funds to support librarian efforts at experimentation. They can assign individual librarians to external committees where their desire to experiment is welcome. The desirable scenario is for the library director and provost to work together to build the culture of assessment in and around the library.

Here are some key steps, culled from the literature on experimentation cultures, that can help even the most risk-averse academic library administrations to begin the process of culture shift:

- **Start Small – Keep It Simple** – Look for low-hanging fruit to change but of the type that staff can rally behind and participate in testing. Experiments need not always aim for radical “paradigm shifting” results. Even limited, incremental change can move staff into some new, untested areas where outcomes lead to valued services for community members or represent a first step on that path.
- **Think Like a Designer/ Scientist** – Designers think of themselves as problem finders first and problem solvers second. Good experiments begin by identifying problems in need of solutions. The design approach is a structured process to identify the problem, the stakeholders, and the needs and resources of the organization. Adopting a design approach will contribute to a shift away from “the librarian knows best” culture. Library experiments should be motivated by a scientist’s curiosity. Seek to understand why things happen as they do and isolate factors that contribute to improvement or dysfunction. Start with mysteries and shape experiments that lead to new discoveries.
- **Support Staff Re-Skilling** – Properly seed the growth of the experimental culture by helping staff

obtain the necessary skills to branch out into new areas where they can test new competencies. Digital scholarship and data research services are two emerging service areas in academic libraries. It's an area ripe for experimentation, but requires staff to re-skill for text analysis, digital preservation and even coding. Academic administrators serious about the culture of experimentation must invest in staff training and support.

- **Create Cross-Departmental Projects**—Researchers and writers know that exploring new territory may be more successful when partnering with colleagues who share interests. Exposure to new collaborators from other disciplines or departments can provide a bridge to learning and discovery. It may even be more fun than going solo. Teaming up can lead to greater productivity as members push each other to the finish line. Library deans and the provost can network to facilitate partnerships between librarians and colleagues with mutual interests in experimentation.
- **Kill Off the HiPPOs**—For the right culture to bloom administrators must believe that great ideas for experiments can come from anywhere in the library. That means administrators must cease to rule by HiPPO – an acronym for “highest paid person’s opinion”. Instead, involve staff in A/B testing. Rather than relying on an administrator’s gut instinct, staff test two options, A and B. This method can involve users in testing. Need to choose between two variations on a new service, a webpage design or

different space configurations? A/B testing may be the answer.

- **Reward Experimentation/For-give Failure**—Phrases such as “fail fast and often” and “ask for forgiveness not permission” have become clichés for promoting organizational innovation. Still, a culture of experimentation will thrive only if the library administration gives staff the freedom to try new things and avoids quashing any and all ideas before their time.

Starting a cultural change begins at the top. If academic administrators truly believe that innovation is the cure for what ails higher education, they must create an environment that is experiment-friendly and give it more than just lip service.

In This Together

A crucial barrier we must overcome to move into this great age of experimentation is our own narrow perception of who among us is best suited to lead academic librarianship into this new age. A stir was created among college librarians who subscribe to the COLLIB-L discussion list when a survey about “mature librarians” was circulated. Many list members believed the questions were skewed towards a biased notion that older academic librarians are poorly suited to adapt to change, particularly new technology. This triggered a conversation about the relative receptiveness of both newer and experienced academic librarians to technology change. Self-acknowledged “mature librarians” claimed they were the change leaders in their libraries and pointed to newer colleagues who were hesitant to try anything adventurous. Newer-to-the-profession colleagues could no

doubt, just as easily, point to senior librarians and administrators who resist their experimental ideas. Rather than arguing over which age cohort or library unit is most or least change resistant, we need to achieve a consensus that all academic librarians, no matter their age or expertise, must commit to experiment with new technology and services. We must leave behind preconceived ideas about who among us is most qualified to lead our way to the future and instead work collaboratively to establish cultures of experimentation.

As a profession, academic librarianship is accustomed to dealing with untested and radically different methods and technologies. Whether it is in the learning sphere, the organization of content, pushing the boundaries of scholarly communication or space innovation, there are ample projects that demonstrate the pioneering spirit alive in our profession. When academic librarians experiment they truly put the “science” into library science, because science is about advancing knowledge through experimentation.

Though we may find it difficult to see through the haze of our current ambiguous landscape, we should remember that, as Selingo said, it is a necessary moment in our evolution to what comes next. Having a road map to the library’s future destination is desirable, but we must remember to make stops along the journey to experiment with the mysteries we encounter. That may lead to the discoveries that point the way to what comes next. Let’s work together to make the best of the great age of experimentation. After all, what is good for higher education is good for academic libraries—and vice versa. —
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