

LIBRARY ISSUES

BRIEFINGS FOR FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATORS

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New Roles for Academic Libraries

By William Miller

The academic library is changing in significant ways. New roles such as serving as digital publisher, nerve center for online access to scholarly materials, or as a center for digital scholarship initiatives are either new to institutions, or were formerly the province of other units, from IT departments to university presses. Older roles are not disappearing however, though some are being deemphasized. Libraries, sensitive to the need for carrying out all aspects of their missions, and conservative by nature, are struggling both to accommodate and to afford this evolution within existing institutional budgets.

Historical Perspective

The primary role of academic libraries continues to be to acquire the scholarly record and facilitate access to it. Emphasis on the facilitation aspect actually dates to the 1960s, though even during that decade there were still library administrators who maintained that libraries had no real obligation to do more than acquire the necessary materials, leaving everything else to the researcher. This attitude was undergirded by tradition and by the fact that libraries had a virtual monopoly over resources. Researchers had little choice but to come to a library's building and negotiate whatever organizational schemes it chose to offer. Acquisition and storage were paramount; some minimal user/study space was available. Provision of reference service and interlibrary loan grew steadily over time, but the academic library of 1960 was essentially not that different from the academic library of 1920.

The introduction of large-scale automation from the 1960s through the early 1990s did a lot to

change internal library processes in the acquisition, cataloging, and physical processing of collections. Automation freed up staff formerly engaged in technical and mechanical work such as creating and filing catalog cards. These efficiencies helped make it possible for a new generation of activist librarians to begin extensive efforts to teach library users how better to find the resources available in the building, a movement that accelerated over time and continues today. Workbooks, seminars, and in-class sessions brought the library into closer contact with the institution's instructional role than had previously been the case, although early efforts were often ineffective, occasionally devolving into nothing more than an activity for faculty to assign because they had an obligation to be elsewhere that conflicted with class that day.

As the internet took hold and individuals acquired their own personal computers, the academic library's relationship to its users began to change in radical ways. Search engines gave people a feeling of empowerment, and increasingly provided the kinds of factual, short-answer questions that had once been the reference librarians' special domain. Libraries accelerated user independence by subscribing to journals (and later buying books) electronically, and making it possible for their users to access these materials without the need to visit the library physically. University-based book digitization efforts, along

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with the extensive digitization projects of Google in particular, began to give people the impression that scholarly resources were sufficiently available, without charge, for them to operate independently of academic libraries altogether.

New Directions Within Library Buildings

Given all of this historical background, the academic library is still among the busiest places on campus, but is valued by most users not so much for its print resources but rather for its study and social spaces and its technology resources. As the scope of what is considered the scholarly record has been expanded by information technology developments, libraries have responded by adding computing labs, GIS workstations, scanners, audio and video production, visualization rooms, and, most recently, 3D printers.

The legacy print collections, while still valuable, are used less and less. The print journals, in particular, are rarely used in libraries after they have converted their subscriptions to electronic form, which most have. Almost no one wants to use print journals now. Print reference works, including indexes and abstracts which formerly were the bedrock starting point for most serious research, now have an inch of dust on their upper edges.

On the other hand, the building is taking on new roles, and new life. This change began in the 1980s, when the libraries started adding dumb terminals to provide public access to the new on-line catalog. These dumb terminals gave way, in the 1990s, to personal computers, and users started to access not only the library catalog and the subscribed databases, but also the Internet itself.

A Campus Computing Nexus. As the libraries added more and more computers, they became primary computer access points on campus, a role that continues to this day. This expansion into service as a campus computing nexus has been followed, in some cases, by a broader collaboration between libraries and IT departments, and the creation of joint service desks. Traditional factual reference questions have trailed off in

recent years, but questions about how to select from among the hundreds of databases and troubleshoot one's computer issues have skyrocketed. Library staff are well suited to understanding such questions and how they relate to accessing library resources, along with helping people with technical issues without regard to library resources.

Collaborative Services. Once the gates to alternative use of library space were opened, and campuses increasingly looked for places to improve students' success, it was a natural step for libraries to build collaborative services and incorporate new facilities into the building—writing labs, orientation offices, counseling services, ombudsman offices, simulation centers, GIS labs, and classroom space, to name a few.

Soft Services. In addition, libraries have been experimenting with soft services such as pet therapy during final exams—things which would have been unthinkable not long ago. Expansion into such areas, along with new efforts to welcome open discussion of the research process and increased collaboration with the teaching faculty, mark a recognition of the centrality of the library building in campus life, and give new meaning to the old cliché about the library being the heart of the campus. Locating such services in a library building is not only an opportunistic use of scarce campus space, but also a recognition that students see the library as a legitimate central location for all their needs.

Expanded Traditional Functions. One could expand the services offered in a library building forever, and it is tempting to treat the building as an open city, for all purposes. On the other hand, libraries continue to need space for staff and business operations, as well as for study and storage of at least some higher-use materials. Students demand longer and longer hours of service, and libraries increasingly remain open 24 hours a day. Meanwhile, in-depth reference assistance and research consultations continue to be core services.

How can academic libraries accommodate both their existing and expanded functions? In some cases, the

answer has been to design new, larger, multi-function facilities. In other cases, libraries have been able to repurpose existing space by either discarding low-use materials, or depositing them into off-campus storage facilities, often in collaboration with other libraries in the region, state, or nation.

Facilities such as the Center for Research Libraries in Chicago hold back-up copies of print and microform materials, obviating the need for member libraries to retain these materials in their physical libraries. Electronic resources are stored in the cloud, not on library shelves. Still, to the extent that libraries are being asked to take on roles which could just as rationally be located elsewhere, such as 3-D printer makerspaces, new resources may well be required.

New Directions Beyond Library Buildings

Even though users increasingly access a library's resources from beyond its walls, the building remains the nerve center for the purchase of electronic resources, which now consume the bulk of an academic library's materials budget, and provision of access to them.

Dealing with Electronic Resources. Staff are not only negotiating licenses and dealing with hundreds of commercial vendors, but also creating the links that connect the library's authorized users to the paid subscriptions that they would otherwise not have access to. Students, and even some faculty members, may not understand that the journals they use are available to them without charge only because the library is paying the subscription cost and creating the tools and links for electronic access to them.

The saddest state of affairs occurs when students or faculty doing work from their homes or dorm rooms, if they do not start their searches in the library's databases, miss out on the multiplicity of vetted academic resources available to them.

In some cases, they simply make do with whatever hit-or-miss resources they find on the open web. In other cases, they stumble upon commercial resources and end up paying personally

for access to them, when in fact they could have accessed the same material without charge, had they used them in the library's databases. This despite what is normally a determined attempt at every academic library to try to make its users aware of the resources at their command.

Library Instruction. To address this awareness gap, librarians since the 1960s have been increasingly involved with instruction in the use of their resources. These efforts have evolved from superficial one-shot efforts (although these still exist) to more complex efforts at integrating instruction and awareness of the literature of a field into the fabric of the course itself. This can entail extensive librarian involvement in the papers and other assignments in a course, such as the creation of an annotated bibliography in lieu of a paper, or as a prelude to it.

In its earlier days, library instruction was always better conducted within the library building, because that was where the resources were. Librarians would happily present material in the classroom but that situation was not optimal. In any case, there were always physical limitations to how much in-person instruction a library could actually provide, making universal access to instruction a practical impossibility.

Online Services and Chat Sessions. Today, most of what an academic library offers is online, and instruction can be offered much more efficiently and universally in an online context. Guides to the literature of a field, or even for a particular course, can be maintained and updated online, with links to the full text of the resources being offered. Hybrid courses, and fully online courses, can provide links to library holdings and resource guides. Such links make it much more likely that the average student in a class will avail him- or herself of the library's resources.

These resources include not only the catalog and the electronic collections, including high quality open resources not owned by the library, but also consultations and chat sessions with librarians. Librarians can be embedded directly in course pages of course management

systems as well, and serve as ongoing and easily available resource people.

In the same way that resolving a problem on a commercial website can often be accomplished quickly by chatting online with a representative, the same is true for students with an information need. They can interact immediately with a librarian online, and of course make a personal appointment also if desired. For the student whose problem occurs at 3 a.m., there are cooperative online library services which take advantage of differing time zones. Libraries agree to provide hours of service at times convenient to them, but the net effect of these "ask a librarian" services now widely in use nation-wide and even world-wide is that by participating in these cooperative reference ventures, libraries can offer reference service by phone or online at any time of day or night, as librarians in various time zones collaborate to make such services available 24 hours a day.

Consultations. Moreover, library instruction itself is now morphing into a much deeper role in consulting, both with students and faculty. As courses evolve away from preset, rote content into more open exploration and evaluation, the librarian's role as guide and facilitator deepens. It also carries political and philosophical implications in terms of democratization and equal access to resources for all. Faculty can depend on librarians to be aware of resources that can deepen the conversation for students and engage them in a more mature conversation than they could have simply by depending on the first result in a Google search.

New Roles for the Collections, Data, and Scholarly Communication

It is no longer enough for libraries just to have collections; they also need to bring them to life, and make them apparent to the users. Admittedly, this is easier for some subjects than for others, but every subject area offers opportunities.

Bringing Collections to Life. Most academic libraries now sponsor or cosponsor lectures and programs that

can feature portions of their collection. Donors love events featuring their donated materials. Historical events and significant biographical dates provide hooks for displays, especially of rare and special collections. Libraries can sponsor performances of the music in their collections, and at least one academic library has its own ensemble-in-residence for that purpose. A physics collection can be highlighted by an event featuring the dropping of items of different weights and composition from a roof or other high spot. Institutional programs in art, technology, or book arts can enrich their program by interacting with library units that promote the study of paper making, binding, and printing.

Collection as Textbook. The library collection itself offers untapped potential for new scholarly uses. For instance, the last few times that I have taught an online class in library science, I have not used a textbook, but rather a combination of free, relevant online web sites and proprietary library resources available to students at the university. No textbook could be current enough for my purposes, and students are pleased to learn that they will not be required to purchase a text. Faculty could make a real contribution to the textbook affordability problem by creating their required and optional reading lists from materials already available to their students, either in their library or on the web.

Libraries as Publishers and Digital Repositories. Libraries have also taken on an increasing role as publishers, sometimes in collaboration with university presses. Journal creation software has enabled libraries to take a leadership position by publishing online journals edited by faculty and students, at minimal cost, and hosting continuing access to these titles. This continues a long-term trend begun by larger libraries (think Toronto and Virginia, among others, and Michigan and Oxford's collaborations with commercial vendors in their text creation partnerships) to digitize books and make them freely available.

Libraries are also increasingly making their digitized special collections

available to the world online. Such materials, especially large and coherent collections, have heretofore been microfilmed or digitized by large commercial publishers, which offer the library a free copy of the resource for archival purposes and perhaps a small payment, in exchange for the right to sell the product commercially thereafter.

The wealth of smaller collections, however, as well as larger ones, that libraries are increasingly able to digitize and make available on the web argue for a much larger publisher role as time goes by.

Data Curation. Another emerging role for academic libraries is data curation. This extension of the traditional archival role is especially important in an era when federal grants require maintenance of the data upon which research was based, and when research is increasingly suspect and occasionally fraudulent.

Libraries can serve as trusted repositories for such raw material. Most academic libraries already serve as institutional repositories for faculty publications and papers, both in paper and online. These repositories are now the subject of argument between commercial publishers, who wish to maintain lengthy embargoes on the online availability of their products, and faculty and librarians, on the other side, who maintain that the intellectual property represented by these materials should be their right to make available as soon as they choose.

Through the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC), libraries are advocating for greater open access and an end to embargoes, especially where research has already been underwritten by the public in the form of government funding.

Software Curation. A complementary new service now emerging is software curation as a digital preservation service; this would include executable content, software models, and games. Libraries are funding data management positions to help faculty create data management plans as well as offering help to all users in accessing and interpreting large data sets such as are available within the University of Michigan's ICPSR.

Scholarly Communication: Looking to the Future

Librarians are taking a leadership role and working with disciplinary associations on matters of scholarly communication, not only involving open access and embargoes, but also on such important matters as contract law and copyright. These are serious issues for academia, and libraries are increasingly funding special positions for staff to serve as campus consultants in these areas. Contracts govern most of what libraries now purchase, and the negotiation process can be onerous, staff-intensive, and expensive. Copyright increasingly hinders innovation, rather than fostering it, as commercial entities now control most scholarly output, and faculty are often at sea regarding their use of intellectual property.

A further issue in scholarly communication involves predatory publishers which charge excessive author fees without quality control or editorial services, and do not really care about the validity of their content. Librarian Jeffrey Beall maintains a list of such predatory journals, along with a process for publishers to appeal their inclusion in the list. This material, thrown out on the open web as purported scholarship, seriously compromises the whole academic enterprise, and leads back to another aspect of the librarians' instructional role, and perhaps their most important one: teaching students to discriminate between real, validated information and research, and false or slipshod work that undermines their own investigations, and muddles the difference between truth and falsity.

A continuing challenge for academic libraries is to pursue new roles, while maintaining old ones, with steady or declining resources. This is a challenge usually shared widely in academia and not particular to libraries. Shared woes are cold comfort however. It is the rare library that can afford to add new positions, such as Scholarly Communications Librarian, or new services such as an institutional repository, without making priorities that leave less time and fewer resources for existing programs or services. Evolution is inevitable, however, and ultimately highly desirable. Institutions that do not change die out. Academic libraries continue to change at a quickening pace, while maintaining traditional services as necessary, and this evolution must continue.--*miller@fau.edu*



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