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Changing roles of academic and research libraries

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Abstract
The iconographic power of a college or university library expresses a purpose not just to collect, but also to organize, preserve, and make knowledge accessible. Today, on the campus of virtually every higher education institution the library occupies a central position. In its placement and prominence, the academic library conveys its integral role in supporting higher education's core missions of research and education.
Part of a library's function has always been to guide users to information—to provide members of an academic community with tools for thoughtful inquiry. Libraries and librarians have exemplified the ideal of a higher education that combines knowledge in depth with contextualized understanding of different fields and domains. The very fact of developing and managing a collection conferred on librarians a degree of authority and influence in shaping the process of research and education.

Keywords: academic, education, research, libraries

Introduction

Academic and research libraries in 2007 confront circumstances that are as distinct from one another as they are different from the past. The combination of constrained budgets and the changing, increasingly competitive domain of information production impacts virtually every library in some way. While some major research libraries have the ability to invest strategically in collections as well as new kinds of services, most university and college libraries now face real tradeoffs between print publications and digital resources. Many librarians find it necessary to cancel journal subscriptions and acquisitions, devoting more time and resources to negotiating licensing agreements with digital providers, acquiring access to important databases and digital collections, re-profiling approval plans, or implementing new software to provide federated searching.

The changes that are occurring—in technology, in research, teaching and learning—have created a very different context for the missions of academic and research libraries. This evolving context can afford a moment of opportunity if libraries and librarians can respond to change in proactive and visionary ways. There are diverse and unmet needs now arising within the academy—many of which closely align with the traditional self-definitions of academic and research libraries. To the extent that libraries and their leaders can reposition themselves to serve these evolving needs—which pertain in part to the centralized storage, description, and delivery of academic resources, and in part to the organization and support of scholarly communication within and across higher education institutions—libraries will emerge as even more central and vibrant resources for their institutions.

Necessarily, these forces of change encourage academic and research libraries to work together in new as well as collective ways. The fact that some libraries have resources and incentives to build and manage unique collections can allow others to focus more intensively on ensuring accessibility to the range of information now available from other libraries as well as from multifarious digital sources. A defining element of this moment is the capacity for academic and research libraries to accelerate their own transformation through collaborative action.

As higher education in India has evolved through recent decades, college and university libraries also have forged pathways to serve faculty and students more effectively. Academic and research libraries have been early adopters of digital technologies and have provided leadership and training to help remake the academic enterprise. And yet, for all their success in accommodating and even powering recent transformations in higher education, libraries and the librarians who lead them now find themselves asking a series of fundamental questions:

- To what extent, and in what ways, are academic libraries likely to change?
- What new roles will librarians come to have in the changing information environment?
- What aspects of the academic library will prove the most resistant or impervious to change?
- Will technology finally spur a recasting of how colleges and universities produce and disseminate knowledge? If such a merging of interests takes place, what impact will that have on academic libraries? Or conversely, if there is not a merging of these two agendas, will academic libraries be caught in the middle of an increasingly difficult competition for institutional resources?

To try to answer these questions is to realize that the years ahead constitute an age of transformation for academic and research libraries. At the outset of the twenty-first century, these institutions confront the need to reconceive and reconstruct the means by which they support faculty and students in research and education. The business of libraries can now be understood as one component of a rapidly

evolving, almost wholly transformed environment in which information is proliferating at heretofore unimagined rates and in which the ability of academic libraries to deliver authenticated and reliable information is continuously challenged by new technologies. Participants in this roundtable included librarians from academic and research libraries large and small, public and private, from throughout India.

Research Work

The time in which the library stood as the repository and guardian of knowledge has given way to an era in which both the production and consumption of information far exceeds the library's ability to contain. To be certain, academic and research libraries continue to perform the roles of organizing, cataloging, and storing information in ways that faculty and students can readily access and use. Most have made remarkable strides in providing users with organizational paradigms and strategies for accessing information beyond their own holdings. At the same time, however, traditional structures of authority and qualitative certification, which the library embedded both in its own collection and in the scholarly apparatus it supported, have been engulfed in a flood of information from multiple sources, disseminated primarily in digital form, and retrievable by means that the library, and hence the academy, no longer control. Faculty has understood well-built collections as a means to enhance their own productivity in teaching and research. The conceptual tools libraries provided could lead seekers of knowledge to resources both within and beyond the library's own walls.

Yet the explosion of information now being produced in digital form has dramatically changed expectations about the production as well as the use of knowledge. Given the Web's ability to expedite the dissemination of information in all forms, "time to market" has become a growing value and source of advantage, in the academy as in other domains. To some extent the sciences have led other academic disciplines in this respect; in physics, chemistry, and increasingly biology, data and findings commonly circulate among peers in digital form and have greatest impact prior to formal publication. Timeliness of communication confers a strategic advantage not just in popular media, not just in the sciences, but in all forms of scholarly communication.

At the same time it accelerates the pace of knowledge dissemination, the Web gives rise to changing conceptions of knowledge production and use. The open information culture as exemplified by Wikipedia attests to a dramatically altered conception of knowledge as something produced, not solely by experts, but through a convergence of many who bring knowledge or experience to bear on a subject. Knowledge that is fluid and even imperfect today carries higher value than knowledge perceived as static and intact. Data that can be copied, pasted, mixed, adapted, recast for evolving purposes and new modes of understanding has very strong appeal in today's information environment, particularly for young people. The problem of managing and preserving knowledge produced in these shifting realms of digital proliferation is enormous, and it is one that librarians need to be integral to solving.

Among young people in particular, however, there is a tendency to consider the library as primarily the domain of the book; fewer now regard the library as either a primary source of information or as a means to discover and access knowledge that exists beyond its own physical collection. The recent OCLC report, *College Students' Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources*, indicates that most undergraduates either do not visit their campus library or do so only one or two times per year. Librarians and faculty members alike complain that young people too often conceive the research process as beginning and ending with an Internet search. Several have observed that it takes only one dissatisfying experience with a library to solidify a student's conviction that the Internet provides more efficient, productive, and enjoyable paths to information.

In many respects the academic library has become transparent. A growing share of libraries' costs consists of providing faculty and students with access to scholarly resources through licensing agreements with electronic journals, databases, and other digital resources. While the library incurs significant costs in providing access to these materials, its users are increasingly likely to consider such access as simply a feature of the landscape—a scholarly abundance or retrievable feast that registers in exactly the same terms as other forms of information ubiquitously available through the Internet. Though they may have drawn extensively on digital resources the library has made available, it is increasingly possible for faculty members as well as students to research and write a scholarly article, book, or essay without ever setting foot physically in the library or understanding the library's role in providing information they have obtained.

Academic libraries in many respects are canaries in the mine for the colleges and universities whose values they epitomize. Traditional two- and four-year institutions of higher education no longer constitute the single means of attaining higher learning. The fastest-growing segment of postsecondary education consists of for-profit institutions that cater to market demand and make no commitment to expanding or preserving the store of human knowledge. For-profit education providers tend to contract out both the library and faculty functions to meet a growing market demand for knowledge and education delivered expeditiously, at low cost, in a form that has immediate practical application.

Changing roles of academic and research libraries

Libraries and librarians are fulcrums of academic productivity, with potential to expand both the range and depth of creative work that faculty and students undertake in any discipline. What has changed are the actions librarians perform and services they provide in carrying out these core functions. The challenge for libraries, their leadership and staff, is to recast their identities in relation to the changing modes of knowledge creation and dissemination, and in relation to the academic communities they serve. Librarians need to reposition the fulcrum and reconceive the kinds of leverage they can provide to faculty and student productivity. No one has been trained explicitly to bring about this change in library organization and culture, though many of those now seeking the Master of Library Science (MLS) degree conceive themselves working in libraries that have emerged from their earlier cocoons. One instance of promising evolution is the more robust integration of library

educators in the classroom brought about by the information literacy initiative of the past two decades.

There are three essential actions libraries must take to achieve the necessary transformation and remain vital forces on campus in the years ahead:

- First, libraries must evolve from institutions perceived primarily as the domain of the book to institutions that users clearly perceive as providing pathways to high-quality information in a variety of media and information sources.
- Second, the culture of libraries and their staff must proceed beyond a mindset primarily of ownership and control to one that seeks to provide service and guidance in more useful ways, helping users find and use information that may be available through a range of providers, including libraries themselves, in electronic format.
- Third, libraries must assert their evolving roles in more active ways, both in the context of their institutions and in the increasingly competitive markets for information dissemination and retrieval. Libraries must descend from what many have regarded as an increasingly isolated perch of presumed privilege and enter the contentious race to advance in the market for information services—what one participant in our roundtable termed "taking it to the streets."

One challenge many institutions face, for example, is to develop deeper and more substantive ties with their alumni. It is not uncommon for graduates to feel a sense of alienation from their alma mater after graduating. Generally the qualities of their experience that undergraduates valued most—including relationships with faculty mentors and access to the academic resources of the institution—come to an abrupt halt with the attainment of a degree. After graduation their first—often their only—direct contact from the institution comes from the development office. The message conveyed is that however substantive and fulfilling their engagement with the institution may have been as students, after graduation the institution appears to regard them essentially as donors. The library can serve an important purpose in sustaining more meaningful ties with graduates through the creation of an alumni portal, with links to academic resources that alumni could not otherwise access on their own. Just as the library has evolved to serve users seeking information beyond its own walls, the population it serves can extend beyond the community of current faculty and students.

In addition to enriching opportunities for substantive engagement with alumni, an alumni portal can help sustain the emotional ties to the institution that in turn help encourage financial giving from graduates. The resources required to establish an alumni portal are significant, and for many institutions the decision to invest in such a service must be balanced against other potential means of serving many constituencies. The librarian's role in such cases may include advocacy for pursuing an important strategic opportunity.

The library can also serve its home institution by providing presidents, chief academic officers, and other administrative leaders with guidance on the complex and changing world of intellectual property. In addition, leaders of academic and research libraries must conceive their responsibility in part as one of advocating the interests of their institution—and of higher education—in policy issues that impact the continued accessibility of information for libraries, their faculty, students, and home institutions. Library leaders must also advocate for preservation strategies, government policies, and business models that assure faculty and students long-term access to the literatures and research documentation that libraries will now license rather than own.

If a library is to make a significant contribution to achieving an institution's strategic purposes, universities and colleges need to regard the head librarian as a key player in the decision making process. Often the organizational structure of the leadership group prevents the librarian from having direct access to the provost and president. As a result, senior administrators often lack a clear conception of the problem the library can help the institution solve. Librarians need to be in positions to give forceful expression not just to the problems but also to the solutions the library can provide. The university or college librarian needs to be at the table as both a thinker and leader along with the institution's senior leadership in determining key strategic directions with regard to changing demands in supporting research and education. In the competition for resources and recognition, leaders of libraries are learning to think and act strategically, both within and beyond the context of their home institution. External resource development from fundraising, grants, partnerships, and entrepreneurial activities, now occupy growing portions of a librarian's time and creative effort.

Significance of the study

The transitions occurring in the production, dissemination, and retrieval of information provide important opportunities for academic libraries to lead their institutions in pursuing new modes of academic research and productivity, much as they did in helping their institutions adopt digital technology in its earlier stages. The evolutions that continue to occur—changing paradigms of knowledge production, expanding sources and modes of dissemination, faster and broader accessibility to a growing range of information – all have the ring of opportunity from the standpoint of an entrepreneur.

Changes in technology and modes of academic work create new kinds of needs that libraries can help fulfill. In this sense the challenges libraries now face are the same ones that confront any contender in the expanding market for information: there is a continuing need to adapt to rapid change, to keep pace with new developments in technology and new competition in the industry.

From the standpoint of an institution's chief academic officer, the only rationale for a library and its budget is to support the work of faculty and students. As the competition for resources within higher education institutions becomes more intense, the amount of funds an institution provides may derive in part from the relative priorities the library budget accords to its diverse functions, including staff, acquisitions, teaching, and technology. The allocation of funds among such budget items becomes a statement of priorities and a vision of roles the university or college librarian envisions for the library. The question any librarian should be asking is, "Do I want to be an advocate for the library as it currently exists or an advocate for the library as it must exist in the future?"

Then there is the tendency among some librarians to regard a comparatively small number of faculty members as core constituencies essential to the library's future. In all likelihood, those faculty members who are the strongest supporters of the library's traditional modes are more essential to the organization's past. The paradox resembles that of university presses in some ways; their controlling influence tends to reside with a limited number of faculty members, many of whom adhere to traditional modes of scholarly dissemination, peer recognition, and academic advancement.

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