

Academic Librarianship and the Future

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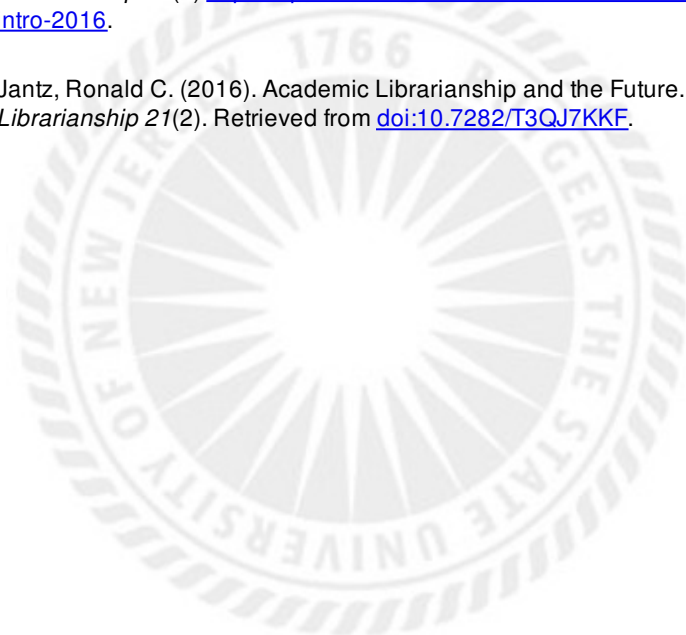
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Academic Librarianship and the Future

Guest Editorial: Ronald C. Jantz, *Rutgers University Libraries*

Introduction and Background

At first glance, the ten articles in this virtual special issue of the *New Review of Academic Librarianship* appear to address an eclectic mix of topics. However, there is an underlying and unifying theme – the future of academic librarianship and the role of the librarian and the library in the institution. Many academic library directors have cited the urgent need for the transformation of the library to meet the information needs of the 21st century University. These ten articles, taken as whole, portray a library that is undergoing change and demonstrate the work of scholars whose research is driving change in their institutions.

How does organizational change come about in an institution that is steeped in the norms and traditions of professional librarianship? Leaders and administrators can articulate a vision – a future preferred state – that establishes a strategic direction and a decision framework. Scholars – librarians, information scientists, sociologists, and others – all have their own perspectives in which a vision of the library is articulated through in-depth research. A vision and strategy that embraces this research can result in a process that informs leaders about possible new services and contributes a vitality and a sense of urgency to the transformation of the academic library. In this virtual issue, the authors report important findings in three interconnected areas: future trends, new services in academia, and the learning and growth of knowledge.

Future Trends

Organizational change is as old as organizations themselves. In today's world of rapid technological evolution and economic uncertainty, the pace of change is much accelerated. To survive and thrive, academic libraries must keep pace with the change in the parent institution and the broader external environment.

In the face of this continuous change, Delaney and Bates (2015) highlight the need for librarians to reflect on the purpose of their profession. These authors suggest that the library and librarians can adapt to change by looking outwards to establish new relationships and collaborations, culminating in new roles. There are ample opportunities in this world of change in areas such as open access, faculty collaboration, new forms of instruction, and research data management. Delaney and Bates propose that it is the *embedded librarian* who can engage and collaborate within the shifting domains of higher education, thus demonstrating value and impact to all stakeholders.

Gwyer (2015) integrates a retrospective from the published literature of the *New Review of Academic Librarianship* and the *British Journal of Academic Librarianship*, a span of 28 years, with concerns of working librarians, identifying emerging trends that suggest new roles and services in the academic library. Is the future a significant departure “from everything that has gone before” or is it “more of a development from the activities of the past”? Using a

mixed-mode methodology, Gwyer identified three major trends – the changing higher education environment, technological developments, and the changing nature of scholarly communication. Three minor trends were also evident – changing user behavior, legal issues regarding ownership of information, and changes to physical space. Gwyer's results lead to some thought-provoking observations: 1) many of the required skill sets for research in an open environment are not within the traditional skill sets of the academic librarian, 2) although book budgets have been significantly diminished, Gwyer found that the book is “still firmly the library brand”, and 3) management practice seems to have fallen out of favor. Gwyer concludes that few of the future trends are totally new but are enhancements to existing services. This conclusion should stimulate thinking on how academic libraries continue to support traditional services while simultaneously launching major new initiatives.

A primary mission of academic libraries is to support scholarly communication and the advancement of knowledge. Given a dynamic external world surrounding the library, we might think that scholarly communication is undergoing major change. Some institutions are moving to bookless libraries and maybe blogs will replace the scholarly journal. Mabe (2010) posits that there are certain fundamental characteristics of scholarly communication that will remain constant over many years. Within an information ecology framework, Mabe (2010) examines the many ways that scholars communicate and he develops a schema consisting of five dimensions that allows us to classify the various types of communication. This approach enables comparisons and demonstrates “the essential similarity between communication instances with and without new technology.” Mabe states that a communication instance – a conversation, lecture, or a symposium – remains essentially the same although technology significantly alters the reach of the communication. He suggests that perhaps there are no truly novel instances of human communication that have emerged with new technologies. With this framework, Mabe comments on the various behavioral aspects of scholarly communication – public/private communication, books/journals, and readers/authors. Practicing academic librarians who are encountering major change in how they do their work will likely argue with Mabe's belief that scholarly communication in a ten year horizon will likely resemble the present system. Yet, his approach suggests again the need for reflection on the purpose of the profession and the implications for scholarly communication.

For readers of this virtual special issue and these authors' thoughts about the future, there seems to be a sense that we need to adapt and continue incremental adaptation, building on existing services. As Mabe suggests, perhaps there is constancy in the various modes of scholarly communication. However, researchers in organizational change and innovation suggest incremental adaptation in a dynamic environment is a recipe for failure. To understand future trends and opportunities, librarians will need to focus more research on radical new technologies such as artificial intelligence and natural language processing, areas that will likely be more impacting on the library than the Internet and mobile computing.

New Services in Academia

Three of the papers in this special issue discuss services or library roles that did not exist in the 20th century academy – managing micro-data, the provision of open access repositories, and the introduction of MOOCs. Launching these services represents challenges that emanate

from the traditions of scholarship, rapid technological evolution, and the embedded cultures of the library.

Creaser and colleagues (2010) investigate the awareness of scholars toward open access (OA) repositories. These authors note that journals constitute over 90% of scholars' information sources and the amount of journal reading has increased over time. As one might expect, considerable diversity of opinion regarding OA exists among scholars across the major disciplines. Physicists have been self-archiving since the 1990s and see a benefit in rapid dissemination of their research whereas humanists view increased citations as most important. Although acceptance of open access is increasing among researchers, important questions remain. What steps are necessary to increase self-archiving rates? Will open access affect and alter peer review and the scholarly communication process? How does the institution benefit from having an open access repository and what is the role of the academic librarian in promoting, marketing, and implementing the repository?

Although one thinks of open access as applying primarily to journal articles, scholars are beginning to self-archive research data. In two case studies, Woolfrey and Fry (2015) describe the challenges of managing micro-data collections and propose a set of best practices that can benefit a library or faculty managed collection. The case study used a methodology based on a service model derived from the Open Archival Information System standard. As one reads this article, the complexity of the micro-data service begins to emerge. The size of the micro-data file can grow to petabytes as in the case of an instrument streaming data from an off-shore oceanographic site to a storage facility. Many of the science disciplines have their own metadata standards such as Darwin core for describing biological diversity. Collection managers will need to understand the data life cycle and also deal with issues such as data ownership and anonymizing human subject data. Consultations with users may require knowledge of special software tools for geospatial or statistical applications. Woolfrey and Fry conclude their article by recommending options for building competency and skills. Managing micro-data represents an opportunity and a new role for librarians and a new service for academic libraries. However, recent research suggests that research libraries are having difficulty getting started with a data management service (Tenopir, et al., 2014). Library administrators will need to clearly define a micro-data service to make sure the library has the wherewithal to develop, introduce, and sustain this new service.

The introduction of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) represents an opportunity for librarians to engage in this approach for free or low cost learning. Gore describes the impact, evolution, and potential of MOOCs, suggesting that librarians are critical for success given their role in the evolving information landscape. Librarians can consult with faculty regarding copyright/licensing issues, delivering remote services, and providing instruction for a very diverse demographic community. The demographics in themselves are challenging in which students are located all over the world with varying degrees of education and in which most MOOCs have a very high drop-out rate from the first day of registration. In describing this challenge, Gore is clearly an advocate suggesting that supporting MOOCs is a strategic priority in which the role of the librarian is restructured to become a consultant and collaborator. Engaging on an equal footing with teaching faculty might involve the librarian taking part in the actual instruction during a MOOC. Gore has challenged librarians to become

involved with MOOCs, presenting a variety of channels for this involvement. However, one area for more discussion is the institutional strategy regarding MOOCs and the business model. MOOCs have the potential to raise the institutional profile, improve educational outcomes and reduce costs but, in many cases, administrators and faculty have yet to agree on how the MOOC should be integrated into the fabric of the institution.

Learning and the Growth of Knowledge

Four of the articles in this special issue focus on the roles of librarians and the impact on student learning and the growth of knowledge. The academic library liaison has a key role in this mission. Cooke and colleagues (2011) have investigated the impact and value of liaison service in the university. This research was undertaken in a context of reduced library budgets, pressure to reduce staff, and demands from administrators to demonstrate value and impact. These authors found that academic library liaisons were valued but there was evidence of lack of awareness of their roles, depending in part on disciplinary culture. An important finding calls for liaisons to be more proactive towards user engagement and demonstrating value. These initiatives are likely to take the liaison into new areas such as providing copyright advice. Perhaps most importantly, this study indicates that the knowledge and skills that appear to be most highly valued by users may not reflect those on which library administrators and LIS faculty educators place greatest emphasis.

Sharman (2014) explored the potential of using tablets in a library service that enables librarians to roam around in various university buildings to engage library non-users and help them at their point of need. Librarians have explored a variety of options that extend reference service outside of the library building. Sharman's interest was motivated by decreasing encounters at the reference desk in conjunction with the corresponding advancements in technology and the advent of tablets such as the iPad. Locations used for roaming included social spaces (cafes), thoroughfares, and working spaces. Roving appears to help students improve search strategies and provides a forum for promoting library subscription resources. Although this roving activity appears to have benefits, the author concludes that it will only be successful if librarians are willing to engage in the practice and move out of their comfort zones.

Buchanan and colleagues (2015) explore how curriculum mapping can be used to evaluate an instruction program for cohesiveness and goal achievement. In this study, librarians participated in pilot projects across four institutions with different Carnegie classifications. Research of this type is critical for understanding how to improve instruction and learning outcomes for students. These researchers noted that students experience frustration when instruction is repeated in various courses or material is presented out of order. The results from these pilots enabled librarians to identify classes in which students would benefit from instruction and to implement an appropriate instructional approach that increases efficiency and effectiveness through proper timing and sequencing.

Librarians involved in the traditional work of instruction, reference and liaison do not typically engage in how learning spaces are designed. What makes a successful, informal, non-disciplinary learning space? As part of a case study, Harrop and Turpin (2013) introduce nine

learning space preference attributes, noting that all nine must be given due attention. The theoretical framework for the study was drawn from three distinct disciplines – learning theory, place-making, and architecture, with a focus on developing a synergy among these three areas. Major objectives of the study included the determination of learners' preferences and informing the design of learning spaces. The nine preferences offer contrasting perspectives as in the need for collaboration and social gatherings versus the desire for a private retreat. Given the almost limitless combinations of learning spaces, Harrop and Turpin suggest that the university should develop a portfolio of spaces to insure that all nine preferences are part of a coherent whole.

Significance of the Contributions and Future Research

These research contributions demonstrate the energy and innovative spirit of the authors who are engaged in transforming the form and functions of academic librarianship. This energy is motivated in part by reduced library budgets, rapid technological evolution, and the diminished need for traditional services. The articles in this special issue represent a spectrum from incremental improvements in reference service to the implementation of major new services. Building on the findings reported in this special issue, it will be important to continue research in related areas. Possible areas for continued research are suggested in these concluding comments.

Library instructional programs still do not scale well to cover all students or offer “point-of-need” instruction. A technology-based approach that offers online instruction is an important complement to in-class instruction where both approaches offer a pathway to a more comprehensive instructional program. In discussing MOOCs, Gore has identified a key part of the library transformation in which librarians become partners, collaborators, and consultants with teaching faculty. However, more research is required to define the MOOC business model and how this form of instruction benefits the university, faculty, and students.

Authors in this special issue have suggested opportunities for new services and related roles. For libraries to successfully introduce these new services, additional research and engagement is needed in at least two areas. First, as noted by Cook et al. (2011) and others, academic libraries have been slow to recognize the importance of marketing and self-promotion (Marshall, 2001). To introduce new services, marketing library value and communicating the concept of a broader role for the academic librarian has become increasingly important. Secondly, Gwyer's result that management practice has fallen out of favor points to another important area. Research and innovation in the management domain will be necessary to successfully introduce new services. Innovative management practices will require the hiring of librarians with non-traditional skill sets. Special units might be required with a significant degree of autonomy to manage budget and make decisions regarding the direction of a new service.

These observations suggest that the philosophy and form of academic librarianship is changing. The authors in this special issue have engaged in rigorous examination of the functions of the academic librarian, resulting in new insights into the importance of developing new knowledge and skills. A strategic mix of traditional and new services is emerging, one that will offer major new benefits to clients but will also require difficult decisions in order to

proceed in an era of limited budgets. Jesse Shera (1966) recognized this situation some 50 years ago in stating that the librarian “must be both critic and architect—destroyer of that which is obsolete and builder of his own future.”

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