Mind the Gap: Connecting Academic Libraries and Campus Communities

By Nancy C. Kranich

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The task of a University is the creation of the future so far as rational thought, and civilized modes of appreciation, can affect the issue.

—Alfred North Whitehead

Alfred North Whitehead, mathematician and philosopher, believed universities should marshal all their resources toward the goal of creating a better world. Can campus libraries heed Whitehead’s call by co-creating the future in concert with their campus communities? In the digital age, academic libraries at two-year, four-year, and graduate-level institutions are evolving from the notion of book warehouses, breaking through their “edifice complex.” Librarians are turning outward toward their communities to reimagine their roles from a collection-centered to an engagement-focused model of service—“from publication as product to publication as process.”

Scholars are also shifting their research practices and teaching methods as network-level services emerge to facilitate their work. They now ask a broader range of questions using a wider range of data and methods, as they disseminate results in multiple forms. “Researchers are drowning in a deluge of raw data and published information and face a bewildering array of options for disseminating and sharing their work.” What they often overlook, however, is the potential role academic librarians can play by partnering with them so they can more efficiently and effectively use new modes of research and publication, navigate copyright limitations, increase the impact of their publications, improve teaching and learning, manage their scholarly identity, and preserve their content into the future.
Nearly eighty years after Whitehead wrote, though, the fit of the academic library within the academic enterprise is under debate. For more than 30 years, academic libraries have transformed themselves to reflect sweeping changes in the ways scholars communicate and professors teach. Cloud computing, open access publishing and social networks are only part of this transformation. Yet, neither library managers nor dependent faculty members can agree on how tomorrow’s academic library should accommodate these changes. How should they respond to disruptive shifts in the identity of the academic library: from product to process, from scarcity to abundance, from outside in to inside out, from push to pull, from transactional to relational, from destination to journey, from local to shared, from size rankings to impact assessment, and from just-in-case to just-in-time? To date, no single, compelling narrative has yet emerged to replace the metaphors of yesteryear.

If libraries are to become co-creators of the future of colleges and universities, they must overcome the “disconnects” they experience among their user communities. Too often, librarians tell one story about their efforts, while faculty, students and administrators tell another. Libraries, for example, invest in expensive web discovery tools, but their user community prefers the ease and simplicity of Google. Another example: librarians build institutional repositories for their scholarly communities, but scholars are reluctant to contribute to and use them. The challenge is to create a promising future together by bridging differences in disciplines and campus locations. Here’s how technology expert John Palfrey characterized the dilemma:

Libraries are in danger because they are caught between two ideas that are not easily reconciled: on the one hand, public sentiment that the digital era has made libraries less relevant, and on the other, the growing number of expectations we have for libraries, stemming in no small part from the very digitalization that the public assume is making them obsolete. These two ideas cannot both be right.

ACADEMIC LIBRARY ENGAGEMENT

For more than half a century, students, faculty, and administrators considered the library the heart of the academic enterprise. Librarians interacted daily, side-by-side, with their respective faculty and students in numerous branch or specialized libraries. The campus community used the library to retrieve materials in closed stacks and to study quietly in isolated research carrels. Universities began to reconfigure these spaces in the 1980s by relocating low use materials to off-site storage, and by consolidating departmental and branch libraries—21 percent in the first decade of the 21st century alone. Not surprisingly, face-to-face contact between librarians and faculty diminished. “I just don’t feel the library is mine anymore,” lamented one faculty member. Academic librarians fell into a more passive role, stewarding collections published outside the university, instead of functioning as partners in the central research and learning processes. Librarians taught “bibliographic instruction” classes to show students how to find books and articles purchased by and housed in the library. Collection size became the primary metric by which libraries measured success against peer institutions. Beyond rankings, administrators rarely cited academic libraries in their reports. They took the “quiet” activities of librarians for granted, often unrecognized as contributing to academic excellence.

Student enrollments at research universities increased by more than a third without a commensurate increase in librarians. Meanwhile, libraries embraced online systems to search their own collections and to gain access to electronic indexes and abstracts. Librarians initially mediated these searches, but these systems enabled end users to search directly. As print content migrated to digital formats, libraries offered remote access, leading
to disintermediation in the discovery process. Traditional research practices relied on locally curated collections accessed through catalogs and interpreted by reference librarians. But these practices gave way to 24/7 alternative remote avenues for simple and immediate discovery and access. Today, library collections remain important, though frequently eclipsed by resources discovered through Internet search engines.

What’s more, the proliferation of readily accessible digital libraries and free search engines arose while the cost of maintaining print and virtual materials skyrocketed. An astounding 402 percent increase in the price of serials between 1986 and 2011 sucked up limited academic library funds at a time of budgetary cutbacks. Monograph costs increased “just” 71 percent during that period, but the share of book acquisitions dropped precipitously. Circulation dropped 44 percent; on-site reference transactions fell 69 percent though use of electronic references increased more than 50 percent, and widespread adoption of course management systems reduced reserve use.8 By contrast, interlibrary borrowing soared by 145 percent; group presentations by 81 percent.9 Google replaced the library as the go-to place to initiate if not complete many research assignments. These trends changed the role of libraries while leading to uncomfortable, even distasteful negotiations involving limited acquisition budgets and journal cuts.

Even Harvard’s libraries no longer contain all of the information produced for and consumed by their respective academic communities. Gone is the era of the comprehensive campus book repository of externally generated content. Academic libraries now acquire less, catalog fewer items, and rely more on licensed databases, open access, and interlibrary loan. Local collections are at best incomplete in a networked world. Less face-to-face interaction occurs at the library as reduced traffic goes through the stacks and fewer users stand in lines at the circulation, reserve and reference desks.10 The roles of librarians are evolving to keep up with changes in academia.

Librarians strive to overcome marketplace trends. They rely on collaborative relationships such as the Hathi Trust for sharing digitized materials.11 They also depend on open access initiatives that include institutional repositories for locally produced research and data, and on electronic publishing programs that embrace mergers with university presses facing declining sales.12 Recognizing that effective navigation of the new terrain requires proficiency, librarians expand information literacy initiatives to teach critical thinking skills, promote ethical use of information, and embed themselves in online courses. They develop expertise in digital humanities, data curation, and instructional design. They also create multimedia labs, information commons, and makerspaces—where people can share resources and knowledge—to advance student learning and faculty research productivity. Their collection development policies are moving from accumulating copies of all materials to becoming inter-institutional networks of stewards of distinctive materials. Each academic library strives for identity by defining new roles as scholars gain direct access to the discovery, circulation, reference, and archival processes, and as the creation, organization, use, curation, and preservation of scholarly information gains greater importance.

Academic libraries must “recast their identities in relation to changing modes of knowledge creation and dissemination, and in relation to the academic communities they serve,” leaders of Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) recently asserted. “Librarians need to reposition the fulcrum and reconceive the kinds of leverage they can provide to faculty and student productivity.”13 Remaining essential, they added, required these transformative actions:

• Progress from the domain of the book to the role of pathway to high quality information resources.
• Change from a repository of ownership and control to a service that helps students and faculty find and use a vast array of information resources effectively.
• Use marketing and advocacy to become even more assertive about their changing roles as one of many contenders for limited institutional resources.  

Other reports went further, calling on librarians to:
• develop user-centered services,
• support all processes of instruction and scholarship,
• participate fully in the research, training and learning life cycles,
• build strong relationships with the faculty, and
• establish collaborative partnerships within and across institutions.

Rather than focus on selecting materials, libraries now rely on approval plans, demand-driven acquisition of electronic books (patron-driven acquisitions—PDA), and bundled purchasing of licensed databases. These efficiencies allow librarians to provide more support for personal information management such as citation software like Endnote and Zotero, and productivity tools like Mendeley and Evernote. Librarians also support lifecycle of research attribution tools like ORCID and DataCite, and expertise databases like VIVO and personal archiving. Easier access to generalized sources enables librarians to connect local and virtual users to special collections through new digitization and description tools. They can showcase locally produced materials and publish open access journals. Librarians and faculty can collaborate to improve student research skills and enhance their results. They can reconfigure their facilities to promote collaborative research projects, learning commons, data visualization, and creative makerspaces.

The possibilities are vast, but innovation requires mutual exploration by librarians and their campus constituents. “It is far too easy to make incorrect assumptions about users’ needs and motives,” state OCLC researchers, “Libraries need to step outside of their comfort zone in looking at the user in the life of the library, and look instead at the library in the life of the user.”

LIBRARIANS-FACULTY DISCONNECTS
Many find new offerings unfamiliar because they are not yet fully diffused. Moreover, the campus community may be unaware of these new services and priorities even when available. Too often, suggests a librarian, many new tools and offerings are difficult to find, buried under layers of websites, or communicated through channels that do not resonate. As more services are provided remotely, the library’s role becomes invisible to faculty members and administrators who interact less with librarians. Faculty and students do not realize that services originate with the library once they connect to the databases and other virtual resources it licenses.

Librarians share one narrative, while faculty, students, and administrators embrace another. Community members continue to value the library, but they are less dependent and more ambivalent about its role. “The library is in many ways falling off the radar screens of faculty,” assert researchers at Ithaka S&R, a think tank that considers the future of libraries and scholarly communication. “Although librarians may still be providing significant value to their constituency, the value of their brand is decreasing.” Younger faculty may grasp the library’s new directions, but these transformations alienate many senior faculty members—the faculty upon whom librarians must depend for institutional support. Librarians “must distinguish between faculty who are essential to the library’s future and those essential to its past,” noted the ACRL report, “building strong alliances with the former while being as responsive as possible to the latter.”

Ithaka’s 2006 survey found that faculty still thought libraries important, but rated highest
the library’s role as purchasers while librarians downplayed that responsibility. “Just buy the books,” several Rutgers deans told the new university librarian in 2016. The gateway function is of lessening importance to faculty but embraced as a primary role by librarians. Faculty members expressed low interest in e-books, while librarians consider e-book availability a growing library function. In 2016, Ithaka found no growing preference for digital over printed monographs. Librarians skewed their budgets toward the purchase of electronic journals, particularly to satisfy scientists whose requests absorb most costs. But scientists are least likely to recognize the continuing importance of the library.

Faculty members are most concerned with the library’s support of their research, reported a 2015 survey, while librarians attributed less importance to that role. When asked what they want most from their libraries, faculty asked for specialized journals. Conversely, librarians felt such purchases were too costly for such a narrow audience. Faculty gave the library low marks for support of course curricula and discipline-wide collections, while librarians considered these services core and gave themselves high performance ratings.

Nearly all librarians wanted improved communications with faculty, but less than half the faculty concurred. Believing faculty too busy to meet with them, librarians suggested that many were unaware of how the library might support their work. By contrast, faculty said they had no need to consult librarians. Nevertheless, many said they reach out to librarians when planning new courses, while only few librarians reported working with faculty on curriculum-related initiatives. “For liaisons who try to offer more active service, they may notice a preference by faculty for distance,” noted two observers, “thus some liaisons recommended liaisons should be thick skinned and able to handle rejection.”

A recent Ithaka survey found an upsurge of faculty members across disciplines that perceived diminished student ability to find and evaluate scholarly information, and a concomitant need to improve undergraduate research and critical thinking skills. Respondents agreed with two statements: “Librarians at my college or university library contribute significantly to my students’ learning by helping them to find, access, and make use of a range of secondary and primary sources in their coursework,” and “Librarians at my college or university library contribute significantly to my students’ learning by helping them to develop their research skills.” Yet, the 2015 study found faculty members less inclined to request that a librarian offer information literacy instruction for their students.

Librarians recognize the importance of redesigning instructional programs to accomplish desired student learning outcomes. Yet, it is uncertain whether they can adapt sufficiently to address the growing needs of students entering their institutions. Moreover, many in the academy have moved beyond information literacy to embrace visual, computer, media, and civic literacies. The library profession itself has difficulty finding common ground on best practices; the difficulties are greater for faculty who hold disparate views of libraries. Some faculty members and librarians call for moving beyond distinct roles toward the development of “research literacy.” Researchers need to manage a broad array of elements, note some observers, “drawing upon the skills of librarians to help with designing personal portals and current awareness services, structuring access to electronic journals, developing and maintaining repositories, and managing access to the exploding body of grey literature.”

Even when librarians play instrumental roles in advancing individual teaching, learning and research skills, their limited numbers are unlikely to have a broad impact on student and scholar achievement.

Open access initiatives, such as institutional repositories (IRs), ensure unfettered free access to peer-reviewed articles produced by campus colleagues. These initiatives help to reposition...
the library’s role on campus by preserving research output and countering spiraling costs for scholarly information. On many campuses though, only a few faculty members deposit their scholarship. “By focusing the message on crisis,” note two scholars, “libraries failed to frame the IR in a way that resonated with faculty... who continued to have access to the majority of content they need via subscription services and so have little incentive to engage with the IR simply to solve what is for them a ‘non-issue.’”

Another critique considered these repositories “roach motel[s]...[that] hold no value for many faculty, which inevitably means such repositories have no access to most faculty-created content.” Too often, the critique continued, libraries developed IRs without a “user-centered understanding” and “have been slow to align development with needs.” “Building it alone doesn’t make them come,” added another observer.

Attempts by libraries to serve as data repositories have also met with faculty resistance, though these alternatives help solve the problems of high costs and the delayed dissemination of traditional journals. Accustomed to using self-reliant processes for managing and preserving their data, nearly 90 percent of scholars interviewed in 2015 preferred to organize data on their own computer. Less than five percent relied on their academic library.

Physics and medicine eagerly adopted open access for journal publishing. But others remain skeptical about quality, peer review and impact.

New physical spaces in libraries reflect the increased focus on services and user experiences. A dazzling information commons at the North Carolina State University library, for example, offers collaborative learning spaces with visualization technologies and game laboratories. Some libraries, first succeeding with spaces that engage undergraduates, launched research commons for graduate students and even faculty. These spaces encourage the formation of communities of scholars benefiting from consultation and training. The spaces also provide access to digital tools that support publishing, archiving, preservation, data storage and analysis, and multimedia. Such spaces are promising, but success is uncertain because most faculty members only use library spaces for book retrieval and meeting room use.

Civic and global engagements are other arenas where paths of libraries and their academic colleagues fail to cross. Moves to bring young people into the public square, increase their sense of civic agency, and foster global understanding sparked innovative “high-impact practices,” including service learning and study abroad. More than two-thirds of college students now participate in service learning activities. Close to ten percent study abroad—nearly double in the last two decades with another doubling predicted over the next. These practices offer substantial possibilities for academic library involvement. But one observer found few library contributions to service learning: “Academic librarians are conspicuous by their absence within the literature of their discipline and the engagement literature.” A study of research library involvement with study abroad found few direct connections and limited sensitivity to the needs of participating students. “To remain relevant in a global university,” notes a study of libraries in an era of internationalization, “research libraries need to shift from a supporting role to a participating one.”

Differences between librarians, faculty, and administrators have consequences. Library directors have lost their jobs at several institutions. An article fittingly entitled “Clash in the Stacks” captures the essence of the problem: how much change is appropriate? “The disputes highlight the growing pains of institutions and their members suddenly challenged to redefine themselves after centuries of serving as gateways and gatekeepers to knowledge.” Budget constraints, the article continues, have often forced radical restructuring. So have conflicting demands from many stakeholders, each with different expectations and experiences.
Patricia Tully, a library director dismissed from Wesleyan University, claimed that moving from print to digital content suggests to some that information no longer needs management. "Administrators look at libraries as something that is easy to cut or easy to subsume under an IT department," she maintained. "It's a matter of breaking free of the library being some irrelevant, old-fashioned thing that used to be important but isn't anymore," she added. "The way we get information has changed, but our need for information and our need for guides to that information continues." Librarians and their constituents must find common ground at a time when library and university experience reinvention.

**BRIDGING THE GAP**

How do librarians and campus administrators and faculty members bridge the gap between their perceptions of the future of their library—and their university—during a disruptive period? How can they go beyond disconnects to co-create the future? Examples of successful collaborations demonstrate possibilities.

The University of Minnesota library system reinvented itself from a "collections-centric to an engagement-centered model." By engaging diverse campus communities, the library embarked on a "paradigm shift" congruent with the university's strategic planning process. Deep involvement with the teaching and research processes enabled the librarians to make "the faculty aware of the importance of information organization, architecture, and literacy to our research, which has changed the way we work." This transformative journey reflected the value of community engagement. "Where attention is scarce, the library needs to provide services which save time, which are built around user workflow, and which are targeted and engaging," stated an OCLC representative. "Aggregating resources may not be enough. They will be shaped and projected into user environments in ways that support learning and research objectives." The Minnesota librarians studied research behavior in different user communities. Cross-departmental, cross-functional collaborative groups then transformed the role of librarians from collecting to supporting teaching, learning, and research. Librarians convinced faculty to deposit their scholarship into the Minnesota digital repository. They developed a portal allowing users to customize their personal experience; embedded instructional programs into first year writing classes, and offered one-stop learning spaces. The librarians integrated library services into the medical curriculum, initiated robust copyright and scholarly information education programs, and launched a statewide health literacy initiative. Today, the university's libraries occupy a visible, valued position on campus by adding value for individuals and communities of users.

Academic libraries are following Minnesota's lead by shifting from traditional collection management roles to partnerships in institution-wide initiatives. No single model applies to all departments across all institutions. Each library must engage with its constituents in unique ways. Co-creation empowers users through active involvement in a value-rich experience; terms such as engagement, embedding, and getting "in the flow" of users permeate the discussions.

The future of higher education involves learning communities where participants support the "advancement and perpetuation of knowledge." That means librarians must tell a compelling story about the broader benefits of their contributions. In return, faculty must disclose their own scholarly aspirations and concerns as they take responsibility for the reinvention of their libraries. Both constituencies must discover ways to communicate and collaborate if they are to educate the next generation of students successfully and to generate new knowledge.

Some proposals for good practices and models arose from background research. The University of Minnesota began its quest with a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. A consultant for New York University Libraries analyzed
the role of the 21st-century library in faculty and graduate student research. Pioneered by the University of Rochester, other libraries employed anthropologists and ethnographers to study how scholars and students use information in the digital age. Still, most libraries lack the resources to investigate their users or contract for this level of research. Useful for kick-starting a transformation process, consultancies cannot substitute for sustained engagement with university constituents.

So how can the library and faculty achieve meaningful engagement? How do we recalibrate our interactions, better understand each other’s aspirations and concerns, and unleash new possibilities? How can the library become embedded in campus life? Though recognizing the need to leverage opportunities for engaging in the lives of students, scholars, and staff, many librarians struggle to identify ways to begin. Engagement experts have developed tools that open conversations on campus and help librarians better understand their academic communities.

Conversations about the future of undergraduate, graduate, and international education, conducted between Rutgers University librarians and other community members, offered a forum for expressing participant aspirations, concerns, and strategies for change. Colleagues shared ideas for building community. Some—calling the meetings “eye opening”—continued their conversations for many hours. These discussions gave the core team knowledge of the aspirations and concerns of their Rutgers colleagues. Contributors wanted more active engagement with student life through freshman seminars, research programs and interdisciplinary salons. They considered out-of-classroom experiences involving faculty essential to community building. Participants stressed the importance of engaging differences to the identity of Rutgers. They considered such engagement key to developing critical thinking skills that ensure student advancement, workplace success, and responsible citizenship. Welcoming the opportunity to build a community of scholars and of campus comrades, they saw the library as the ideal convener. The discussions shifted the focus of librarians from “selling” their services to identifying the community’s aspirations and determining how to achieve them together. The dialogues promised no new programs, but they empowered librarians to step across traditional boundaries and find common purpose with colleagues and students across the university.

In a climate of scarcity, engagement requires assessment. What indicators will measure the success of engagement activities? Traditionally, libraries counted transactions of loans, reserves, acquisitions, reference questions, searches conducted, and instructional sessions. But these data do not reveal the extent of relationship building. Assessment must focus more on the development of credible partnerships, the extent of involvement with the academic life of students and faculty, and the kinds of collaborative accomplishments. Performance reviews of librarians should assess understanding of faculty interests, culture, aspirations and struggles. They should also assess alignment of individual efforts with collective tasks, and innovative relationship building. Libraries can use these reviews to recruit and retain engagement-oriented librarians and enhance consultation with the community. Librarians can only transcend their traditional roles and boundaries by recognizing their broader responsibilities, rewarding innovation and collective actions, and turning outward to increase impact.

Faculty and academic administrators must also rethink the role of the library in the creation and utilization of scholarly information. After more than two decades of economic constraints related to publishing, academics can no longer rely solely on publication in prestigious but expensive journals, give away their copyrights, ignore open access options, and expect the purchase of all recommended titles. Academics must also embrace 21st century literacy skills as necessary for student retention
and graduation, for successful careers, and for responsible citizenship. Faculty and administrators must therefore collaborate with librarians toward common goals; “expecting more,” in the words of a promoter of the “New Librarianship.” Such scenarios, say two Ithaka representatives, “can lead to the development of capabilities that are essential but not ordinarily identified as being within the library’s purview. What a compelling future!”

CONCLUSION

Librarians, faculty, and administrators must work in tandem to create a common future. “The very act of turning outward drives internal change,” said innovator Richard Harwood. When turning outward, librarians replace activities with action, organization with community, outreach with engagement, inputs with impact, and turf claims with collaboration. These pivots begin with talking and listening to all campus players. Face-to-face dialogue leads to learning together, building community, innovating, and creating positive change. No single model offers a perfect formula for success, but librarians can no longer envision this future alone. They must collaborate with their campus colleagues to determine the possible and preferable. “If we don’t join in creating the future, we may find that the future does not include us,” two librarians warn their colleagues. “We can make ourselves an integral part of the future by working together. Collaboration, as much as competition, is here to stay.”

Scholarship involves sustained, continuous dialogue among networked communities; such collaboration requires recognizing the contributions of librarians. Despite the transformation of academic libraries from collecting to connecting, too many academics retain outdated views and remain unaware of possible partnerships. If librarians and their campus colleagues are to succeed in this brave new world, the conversation must occur at the “intellectual intersection of the campus”—where librarians and their constituents co-create the future.

NOTES

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3 Bourg, Coleman and Erway, 2009.
4 On how readers discover scholarly content, see Bell, 2009; Rieger, 2009; Dempsey, 2012, and Wolff, Rod, and Schonfeld, 2016, 11-14.
5 Palfrey, 2015, 19-20.
6 Davis, 2011, 10.
7 Oakleaf, 2010, 28.
8 Davis, 2011, 38.
10 Arendt and Lotts, 2012, 163, found that 68.7 percent of surveyed librarians communicated primarily by e-mail with their liaison departments. Only 11.4 percent typically communicated face-to-face.
11 On Hathi Trust Digital Library, see https://www.hathitrust.org/.
14 Ibid.
15 See, for example, Dewey, 2014 and Kenney, 2014.
16 Jaguszewski and Williams, 2013.
18 Proffitt, Michalko, and Renspie, 2015, 6.
19 Kenney and Li, 2016.
22 Housewright and Schonfeld, 2008, 6.
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27 Ibid, 17.

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Cerise Oberman coined the phrase as dean of Library and Information Services at SUNY

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