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Mis-Information at the Heart of the University: Why Administrators Should Take Libraries More Seriously

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Mis-Information at the Heart of the University: Why Administrators Should Take Libraries More Seriously

Abstract
Major university research library systems are complex organizations made up of at least three types of library entities -- the central library, the department/school library, and the professional school library. Are these libraries cost centers or value centers? The voices of all three types of libraries should be heard for their perspectives when determining the future of the university library system with respect to this basic question. Otherwise, the competitive future of the university and its key programs may be put at risk. Knowing the core businesses of the university and how the library can best serve its fundamental purpose is essential.

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Mis-Information at the Heart of the University: Why Administrators should take Libraries more Seriously

By Stuart Basefsky*

Abstract
Major university research library systems are complex organizations made up of at least three types of library entities -- the central library, the department/school library, and the professional school library. Are these libraries cost centers or value centers? The voices of all three types of libraries should be heard for their perspectives when determining the future of the university library system with respect to this basic question. Otherwise, the competitive future of the university and its key programs may be put at risk. Knowing the core businesses of the university and how the library can best serve its fundamental purpose is essential.

Whether or not it is true that the library is the heart of the university, the library remains a key part of university infrastructure--both physically and intellectually. It is surprising, therefore, that voices of highly qualified librarians--particularly those in specialized disciplines--are rarely solicited by university administrators making plans for the future of the research library system. Consequently, administrators have the misconception that there is consensus among librarians about what that future should be. Lacking these other perspectives, administrators may be putting the competitive futures of their universities and their key programs at risk.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

In fact, at most large research universities, there are several types of "research libraries," with differing modes of operation and approaches to meeting the core needs of faculty, students, and researchers. Among these are:

1. The central library of the university, which serves the general needs of the university constituency. This kind of library is often highly bureaucratic and factory-like in its approach to service, with friendly, helpful front-line personnel. It is represented most often by the Association of Research Libraries.

2. The school or departmental library, which serves the in-depth needs of a particular discipline and extends that service to the general university as a matter of course. This kind of library, while sharing the catalog of the central library, is often completely integrated into the programs of its school or department. It can customize services for faculty, students, and researchers and works as a partner in the pursuit of scholarship and teaching. Engineering and other scientific specialties and business libraries are most common among these. To a large extent, the continued success of these schools and departments are intertwined with their libraries. These libraries are most often represented by the Special Libraries Association.

3. The professional school library, which exists as a matter of necessity (not choice) because it provides an essential element of professional training and certification without which the school itself could not function. These libraries are totally integrated into their programs; they provide customized service. In fact, these libraries operate in significantly different modes than the central library, with highly specialized, technical subject matter requiring inputs not available from a central library. They may or may not share the central library catalog. Nevertheless, they also serve the general university needs in these areas of specialization. Medical libraries and law libraries are the most common of these. These libraries are represented respectively by the Medical Library Association and the American Association of Law Libraries.

Given the diversity of research libraries on campus, why do university administrators listen nearly exclusively to the perspectives of the Association of Research Libraries? Could it be that most presidents and provosts come from disciplines within the university that have not been served by the more integrated types of libraries? In other words, is it because these concerns are not within their experience that they do not think to ask about them? Could it be that most directors of university libraries do not come from these "other research library" backgrounds and are therefore unaware of the issues? Or could it be that the directors of university libraries do not want to cede control of library issues in part to perspectives that they do not share?

Regardless of the reasons, any major research university and its trustees should be asking more questions on the key emerging issues concerning libraries and how these play out in helping or hindering the core business of the university.

What are the key issues and the questions that should be raised about them?

Every university is unique. As a result, choice of directions will vary. There is, however, an approach to decision making that is considered reasonable. This includes identifying the "core business" of the university and then determining whether a decision will help direct a university to its desired goal(s).

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

The barest outline of the core business of any major research university (that which all U.S. universities have in common) is as follows:

Promote scholarship and teaching in a manner that results in:

* Attracting and retaining top faculty and students.

* Providing programs that give reason for students/parents to pay high tuition rates (for private universities and some public) and/or support tax rates that maintain or increase quality (of public institutions).

* Producing students and research that attract the interest of major corporations, governments, and associations to not only recruit the student body upon completion of their programs but also to further support the programs that feed their respective interests and to indirectly fund programs not within their interest.

* Developing alumni who will succeed in life and hopefully reinvest philanthropically in the university that set them on their path.

* Creating insights and innovations that will allow for social, humanistic, political, scientific, economic, and other types of progress and improvements to general understanding, life, and civilization.

A well-run library system supports all of these elements in greater or lesser degrees. However, effective support is not a system matter. It is the result of specific efforts. Business professors and students are interested primarily in the services of the business library and secondarily of the library as a whole. Law professors and students are interested in the services of the law school library and secondarily of the library as a whole. In fact, this is true of all schools, departments, and disciplines. And if there is no separate school or discipline-based library, the collection within a specific discipline is what interests faculty; the library as a whole is only a secondary interest. These specific libraries and collections are inherently part of the rating and therefore the attraction of a particular program to prospective students and faculty.

Because of the library's role in supporting the core business, the following question is key:

Is the library primarily a cost center or a value center?

Since everything has both a cost and a value, this is not easy to answer. It depends on the vision of the university and its Board of Trustees, or a school/department and its faculty. The answer should not, however, come from partially informed perspectives; fundamental to the answer should be the "core business" of the university.

An unfortunate perspective comes from trustees in the corporate sector who often view libraries as a cost center in their business. They make arguments that space (particularly in high-cost, densely populated cities) is too precious and that maintaining collections of books in addition to electronic resources is not cost effective.

They are in many instances correct. However, what they fail to realize is that they can rid themselves of the physical collection because their librarians are relying on access to university research library collections. By transferring their own notions of "core business" incorrectly to a university environment, they are setting in motion negative consequences for both the university and for the long-term viability of their own organizations. Instead, the university should be soliciting donations from these trustees who are making cuts in their own businesses based on the assembled collections of universities.(Their librarians get document delivery, scanned pages, etc., from university collections.)

This so-called space problem leads to a key issue:

Offsite storage as a solution for what?

One narrow but universal part of the "core business" of the university is the research endeavor. The economics of this area are not well understood by non-academics. For example, a typical scholar coming across a reference makes choices as to how much effort will be expended in following an idea. The first preference would be having the information available electronically at the desktop. Second would be retrieving the material from the library within a few minutes or hours--same day. Third, and least desirable, would be placing a request for offsite or interlibrary loan retrieval.

These preferences are not trivial. Too often, even the best scholars will forgo seeking material that is not available the same day. They are in hot pursuit of an idea, a thought, and they want to put it to rest as soon as possible. (Yes, scholars can be lazy or at least time constrained). To most scholars, offsite materials are no different from interlibrary loan materials. University libraries, however, like

to brag about how quickly they can retrieve the material--except on Friday and Saturday. From the scholar's point of view, why purchase material in the first place if it will not be readily available? Any impediment to same-day access is potentially an impediment to scholarly pursuit. In a medical library, offsite can be life threatening. In a law library, offsite can lead to additional billing hours (at $150-plus per hour, this adds up), as well as delayed justice or worse.

Ironically, offsite storage facilities were rationalized because trustees and university administrators did not want to build new libraries. In fact, an offsite storage facility is a new library. It needs to be staffed, have services provided, and so on. Unfortunately, this new library serves no one in particular. It becomes a generic, costly warehouse that cannot be browsed. (Some may argue that digital browsing is possible. But this is putting the cart before the horse. If a book is not yet digitized, why is it going offsite now?) As more requests go to offsite storage facilities, more personnel will have to be hired to handle them and for longer hours.

What message is being sent to faculty and students when books go offsite?

Core to the university's business is the writing and publication of books. Why then are books so little valued that they are sent offsite? Some faculty and students wonder why they are produced at all. Publishers will tell you that books are not dying out, however. Publishing in print format is the only way they can make adequate profits. Faculty seek to publish with the most respected publishers. There is no viable alternative for faculty at this time.

Nonetheless, some university librarians say that there is no realistic alternative to offsite storage. The current cost of building traditional libraries is exorbitant. Other librarians will say that the problem is with architects, who should emphasize reading and study rooms, adding all the electronic and wireless access possible. The book storage areas could simply be compact shelving the size of football fields or modules to be added onto just like Lego systems. In any event, decisions to go offsite should not be taken lightly.

How important is browsing?

Browsing is fundamental to the traditional American concept of a library. Subject analysis places similar books in open stacks reasonably close to each other. In fact, my personal definition of library science (which is not really science) is as follows:

The purpose of librarianship is to enhance serendipity, by making it possible for researchers to come across useful related ideas that they would not normally have found through pursuit of a reference.

This is true for both the traditional print library and the Internet. Enhancing serendipity provides an environment for thinking, reflecting, and discovering. While technology certainly provides tools that can quickly and effectively browse the internal parts of any digital document, it does not allow for the same visual scan as books on a shelf. Scanning with a computer only gets you what you ask for. A visual scan provides for the unsought but interesting item that one did not think to look for. Again, regardless of perspective, terminating traditional browsing will have great consequences.

It is perhaps instructive to learn that the University of Sienna (Italy) recently constructed new facilities, including a new library. To attract and retain students and faculty, it highlights its "completely open stacks," which are now disappearing in the United States. It also has wonderful electronic facilities, wireless reading rooms, and more. European faculty who were once envious of U.S. open stacks now have them. Is this an element of competition for the future? With Internet access,

good research facilities, state-of-the-art classrooms, and the ambiance of Sienna, would young faculty rather be in the cold Midwest or Northeast United States or in Tuscany? Having competitive salaries for faculty is the last remaining obstacle to keep universities such as Sienna from reaching the top ranks. With competitive salaries, they could easily compete with the U.S.

As the business model for the university changes, should the university be looking for different models of librarianship?

The answer is maybe yes, maybe no. Traditionally the university has used the models put forward by the Association of Research Libraries. Are these effective in today's world?

School, departmental, and professional libraries work differently. They are part and parcel of the institutions they serve. They work hand in hand with faculty in the research process. They train students and research assistants and conduct classes. Yes, the traditional research library does many of the same things. However, there is a significant difference. School, departmental, and professional libraries work with departments to make these institutions competitive. They customize information to meet specific needs of a discipline(s).

Librarians in these integrated libraries often sit on committees of their departments and schools and conduct discussions that improve the competitive and research nature of the entity. They do not wait for the institution and its faculty to come to them. They go to the faculty and the administration, trying to be helpful as part of their mission. Faculty become colleagues, not just clients.

If the university is now a business, should not its libraries function like business libraries? What does it take to make a university efficient? Should administrators and staff be trained to use information products that improve their work and their decision-making capabilities?

Until university administrators ask for alternative perspectives, they will not get them. And when they ask, should they be asking the traditional university librarian or persons more familiar with these other models?

One model is not necessarily better than another. The university will lose out, however, if it eliminates competing models--models that are producing valued results.

Too often, administrators argue that the costs of maintaining separate libraries are too high, but they fail to consider the cost of eliminating them. The general pattern is that any major department or school whose own library was eliminated soon becomes marginalized in its field.

Should libraries consolidate or further separate into competitive disciplinary units?

It is difficult to make arguments against sharing the same catalog. This makes sense, when possible, for the sake of the user. It is easier to have one place to look (now in addition to Internet searching) on a campus. However, the increasing need to operate in real time and stay competitive in a discipline argues for more libraries rather than fewer. A central library whose mission is to serve everyone serves no one well. However, discipline-based libraries and librarians develop extraordinary expertise in their respective fields and can provide in-depth perspective and knowledge when called upon. As universities talk about increasing interdisciplinary approaches to topics, they need to have disciplinary experts providing the guidance to those not familiar with the intricacies of a field. Generalist librarians can be very helpful but not at the in-depth level.

An interesting example of a logistical mistake made recently at university libraries is eliminating positions for government documents librarians. The one-time government documents librarians are

now working general reference. The result is that no one is developing in-depth knowledge of government structure, policy, legislation, publications, statistics, and so on. The loser is the university researcher in need of expert advice.

In fact, librarians are not really librarians anymore. The library collections are in many instances secondary places to look after initially searching on the Internet. Yes, many expert librarians now train students to use the Internet first--not because it is the best place to find reliable answers, but because it is the best place to find useful wording on a topic so that the more refined academic tools can be better utilized. In some instances--such as seeking digitally born government information--the Internet is the best place. Nothing is clear anymore.

Consequently, a department wishing to become ultra-competitive might consider employing a librarian as both an Internet expert for its faculty and a lobbyist to get the central library to better serve their needs. In fact, librarians no longer need to be tied to libraries in order to function--perhaps they should not be. Unless someone raises the question, this prospect will not come to light.

Open access and the question of whether publishers are friends or enemies?

There is nothing wrong with open access as a concept, but its reality can be flawed. One question is the business concept behind it. For some reason, administrators are being told that open access costs less than purchasing bundled materials from commercial publishers. Again, the answer could be yes or no. Open access is not free. Whether one is talking about an institutional repository or an academic journal, someone has to pay. If the journal is run by a professor, who is paying the professor's salary, research assistant wages, secretarial costs, office space costs, and more? Considering all of those costs, is it really cheaper? Is the journal run by a professor who has this as a passion but no succession plan? If so, will the journal be sustainable? Do students and parents want to pay for this with tuition? Do alumni want to endow it?

As for the institutional repository, if it is run separately, how many people need to be paid to run it? Who will pay? If it is a commercial repository (Proquest/Be Press comes to mind), they bear the burden of development and sustainability, and contractual relationships leave possession of the repository in the hands of the university, school, or department. To my knowledge, academic libraries have no experience in developing business models for publication. Who is asking for the model? It could be that, given all of the costs, commercial bundles are not so expensive (that is not to say that prices cannot or should not be negotiated lower).

Where is the future taking academic libraries in relationship to universities?

One hears much about costs and savings and how these argue for consolidation, increased offsite storage, and more. However, an honest evaluation comes down to making a determination about whether the library is a cost center or a value center for a university.

If it is a cost center, then there is no need for continuing university libraries as we know them. For example, there could be one Ivy League (or any other type of) library. All eight Ivy League universities could pool their money for one catalog, one central processing unit (or each school could have its own processing unit while sharing one grand Ivy League catalog). The catalog server could be located in India and maintained by IT people at significantly lower wages. One electronic acquisitions center could maintain all the IP addresses for buildings throughout the Ivy League. All books would be tagged with radio frequency identification so that their locations could be monitored continuously and recalls directed to cell phones and e-mail. There would be an Ivy League contract for all elec-

tronic publications. Offsite books could be stored in a handful of locations shared by all. Reference and other public service librarians could be located anywhere on campus--dispersed among various departments and answering directly to their respective departments, not necessarily to a central library. The physical object and its location are no longer significant; therefore, library organization no longer matters. Only discipline-based service librarians will matter. And this kind of nonsense dream could go on in greater detail. (It might happen, but very slowly. Rushing into the future without bringing faculty along could damage the core operation.)

The fact is that many of the academic, discipline-based libraries within the larger library system remain value centers and are likely to remain so for some time. This is because the real world that they serve has not caught up with the technology and its possibilities and because the library is not a grand theoretical schematic. It serves very real functions. In some disciplines, it is the laboratory of the school. In others, it provides a competitive edge. It is not a Library of Congress serving all and no one. The Library of Congress is a type of research library, but it is not an academic library. It is an inappropriate model for a university.

Again, one has to go back to the "core business" and discover that scholarship and teaching need real support by real people with specialized, in-depth knowledge. In the same way, that distance training is not replacing universities, remote but accessible libraries will not replace the need for information competency at the local level. Librarians are not clerks; they are professionally trained experts in various disciplines who teach, advise, consult, and customize (or ought to) information for the pursuit of scholarship.

As the world of information becomes evermore complex, the ability to find and harness the essentials is in greater demand. University administrators ought to take the questions concerning the role of libraries seriously and thoughtfully and seek dialogue.

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