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Scholarly communications and the role of the liberal arts college library

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A little economic history

The conversation on scholarly communication (often referred to as a “crisis”) has its origins in the mid-1980s. At that time, the balance of trade between the United States and its trading partners in Europe was so far out of balance that American products could not compete internationally. The Reagan Administration, seeking to correct the problem, devalued the dollar at the so-called Plaza Accord on September 22, 1985.¹ In that moment, the price of journals in many Scientific, Technical, Engineering and Medical (STEM) fields, jumped—in some cases by as much as 25%. Many of the top journals were published by British or European for-profit houses, such as Pergamon, Elsevier, Springer, Wiley, Blackwell’s, Taylor & Francis, and others. The devalued dollar had a huge impact on academic libraries that subscribed to those publishers products.

Under any other economic model, those journals would have faced the fate of United States products in Europe prior to the decision to depreciate US currency: Libraries would simply have refused to purchase them, perhaps seeking cheaper alternatives. But therein lays the challenge faced by libraries that support any kind of scholarly enterprise: each journal is, in its way, its own monopoly. If a particular

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title is central to the study of a particular field or sub-field, the library that supports it must continue to buy it.

To what had to be the delight of the European journal publishers, American college and university libraries begged, scrounged, recalculated budgets, cancelled titles, plundered the monographs budget.... and continued many subscriptions. The big European publishers realized that they could indeed charge “what the market would bear,” and the market appeared to be limitless for top tier journals. Prices began the steady climb that haunts us to this day—almost twenty-seven years after the shock of those first price hikes hit academic library budgets.

Too Small to Play?

One of the most puzzling aspects of the entire conversation around scholarly communication-- the impact of existing models, the search for alternatives, the need for advocacy—is the assumption that it is the purview of Carnegie Research I institutions first and foremost, followed by those institutions with robust doctoral programs. The corollary is that small academic libraries—college libraries at liberal arts institutions, in particular—are not significant players in the conversation, nor should they be. Many in the academy, including those who work at such institutions, tend to think that the liberal arts college environment is too small to have a significant voice in the debate over alternatives to traditional models. What need is there for small college faculty to understand intellectual property rights, alternatives to copyright and the relationship to access, or even to be terribly concerned over where they might choose to publish?

Similar assumptions and arguments abound: liberal arts college faculty members focus on teaching, not research. Liberal arts colleges do not expect their libraries to support a research agenda, so these questions are not their concern. Liberal arts colleges are too small to have political impact at the

national level, and they certainly have no leadership clout. And they are certainly too small, the argument goes, to support any kind of institutional repository. Their small size ensures that there is insufficient output to justify anything of the kind. Incredibly, these views are shared not only by the professoriate at large research institutions, but by some faculty members at small colleges.

...Or Too Important Not to?

Yet in the past decade, there has been a significant and growing awareness and advocacy movement among liberal arts college libraries as academe struggles with ways to preserve what is good about the current system of sharing and vetting scholarship, while maintaining or even expanding access to scholarly output. Chief among those assuming a leadership role are members of the Oberlin Group of libraries.ⁱⁱ Scenarios that look ahead to the next decade and beyond would be wise to look closely at the impact the small college library can have on the very lifeblood and purpose of libraries: the collection and dissemination of scholarly content.

When one considers the niche occupied by the Oberlin Group schools, their influence and place in the conversation becomes much clearer. In many ways, the eighty institutions in that group represent the top tier of liberal arts colleges, but by no means do they negate institutions that are smaller or less selective. If anything, they are the leading edge of a force that could significantly affect the ongoing shift to alternatives in access to scholarly content.

Teaching, Research and Scholarly Communication

At many of the Oberlin Group schools, the research agenda is alive and well—and an expectation of the administration.^{iii, iv} While teaching is very much a focus at those institutions, there is a concurrent emphasis on—and even a tradition supporting—undergraduate research, particularly in the sciences.^v

Many faculty members at Oberlin Group colleges are successful authors of grants from the National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, the Howard Hughes Medical Institute and other significant science funding agencies. (It is not unusual for grant proposals to include an undergraduate research component, which can be an attractive distinction to funders.) Ultimately, faculty members at liberal arts colleges may not expect to produce the research dollars or output that their PhD-granting counterparts do, but their research is absolutely an expectation of theirs and their institutions.

Further, the teaching emphasis of such institutions lends itself to teaching students engaged in research about the history and economics of scholarly publishing, how copyright and intellectual property laws intersect with the distribution and control of scholarly content, questions of access, and perhaps most obviously: questions of social justice.^{vi} At institutions that emphasize the liberal arts and a broad engagement with big-picture questions about the human condition, what better cross-disciplinary vehicle is there for discussing questions about the public good, the rights of authors and students, equity of access across economic and geographic boundaries, educational opportunity and fairness?

Political Clout: Small, but Powerful

Make no mistake, librarians and their faculty colleagues at liberal arts colleges find journal cancellation projects and access questions no less painful than do their colleagues at larger universities. Lack of access to core and specialized publications has been a chronic problem since the first glimmers of price increases in the mid-1980s. As a consequence, small colleges have worked to create buying consortia that would allow them to meet as well as possible the immediate demands of their faculty and students, while depending heavily on resource sharing arrangements to fill in the blanks. Rather than viewing their counterparts as competitors, small college libraries tend to seek alliances in their peer institutions.

Those alliances are what allow the Oberlin Group schools to become highly visible leaders in terms of advocacy for such efforts as the Open Access movement, the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC), and the Coalition of Open Access Policy Institutions (COAPI). Further, many of the institutions in the Oberlin Group serve as a significant source of the professoriate, sending a disproportionate number of their graduates on to seek PhDs across the disciplines.^{vii, viii} A recent study by Dr. Diane Saphire at Trinity University confirms this outcome: using data collected by the Higher Education Data Service (HEDS), she found that “...about 7% of about 7% of students receiving a bachelor’s degree from an Oberlin Group institution go on to receive a PhD . About 2% of students receiving a bachelor’s degree from a non-Oberlin Group institution (that has been the origin of at least one PhD in the past ten years) go on to receive a PhD.”^{ix} (Certainly, the focus on undergraduate research contributes to this outcome.) Thus, those institutions and their libraries have an obligation to expose their students to the existing scholarly communications system, its history, traditions, and the practices and legislation that have shaped it. With that comes the obligation to challenge future professors to think about ways to change a system that many agree is broken.

Just as future professors are currently enrolled at small colleges, consider that some members of the current professoriate—teaching, researching and working at all sizes and types of institutions—received their undergraduate degrees at small liberal arts colleges. When institutions such as Lafayette College in Pennsylvania, Oberlin in Ohio, Rollins in Florida or Trinity University in Texas occupy a leadership role in the Open Access movement (as each has done), it demonstrates to our academic alumni how very important the issues surrounding scholarly communication can be across the academy.

The political impact of small colleges can be as surprising as their role as the nursery of the professoriate. A number of powerful legislators—members of the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate—also received their undergraduate degrees at small undergraduate institutions. Texas

Senator John Cornyn, a co-author and staunch advocate of the original Federal Research Public Access Act, is an alumnus of Trinity University. He cares about what his alma mater does in the Open Access environment, and Trinity most certainly cares about his support. Through that relationship there is the potential for influence at the national level.

Institutional Repositories @ Liberal Arts Colleges

The debate continues about the way repositories for peer-reviewed scholarly content should be structured: should they be institutionally-based, or is it more appropriate to let scholarly disciplines and their societies gather content for openly-accessible dissemination? Many faculty members feel that their scholarly societies are the logical group to collect, index, and disseminate the content of disciplines, pointing to the early days of print publishing as the model. At the same time, much of the work associated with curation, discovery and dissemination requires the knowledge and skills that only librarians can offer, which suggests that even the societies must find repository support at academic institutions.

Also underlying the debate is the question of content output. At small institutions, administrators believe the expense of supporting an institutional repository is cost-prohibitive for the number of contributions the institution's faculty might produce in the course of a year. Yet when one considers the annual expense of the priciest journals, and then considers the potential value of showcasing not only faculty research but also top student work, small journals, and locally-held collections, the real value of such a repository becomes clearer. In a time when colleges and universities are finding it more challenging to justify the expense of attendance, the value of teaching and research to the society, finding and funding a vehicle that will make the college's contributions easily findable by potential

students, donors, and others obviates the need for a simple, turnkey system that even a small library can use and support.^x

Meanwhile, the National Institute for Technology in Liberal Education (NITLE) in collaboration with the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) is launching the Anvil project, a venture aimed at supporting humanities publishing in a digital-only environment, relying on Creative Commons licensing to encourage wide dissemination and use through Open Access models. Still very much in the planning stages at this writing, the Anvil project has attracted a stellar advisory board and is gathering information from librarians, scholars, university presses and administrators about what is lacking in current publishing models, what is needed, and what features will be required to ensure success.^{xi} Small colleges with publishing interests, such as Middlebury, Bryn Mawr, and Amherst Colleges and Southwestern University have combined forces with research institutions such as Stanford, Washington University (St. Louis) and the University of Virginia to support and encourage the Anvil project.

Looking to the Future

As we consider the profession of academic librarianship for the next ten to fifteen years, it is important to think beyond stereotypes and consider hidden opportunities. Collectively, small liberal arts college libraries occupy a niche that holds much greater power than their individual size would indicate. The ability to respond quickly, build alliances across the faculty and among peer institutions, construct programs that not only benefit the professoriate but the undergraduate teaching and research missions—all of these traits suggest that small colleges will occupy a growing leadership role in the search for solutions and new models in Scholarly Communication.

NOTES

ⁱ “Announcement the Ministers of Finance and Central Bank Governors of France, Germany, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Plaza Accord)” (1985). <http://www.g8.utoronto.ca/finance/fm850922.htm>

ⁱⁱ To view a list of Oberlin Group members, see: <http://www.oberlingroup.org/>

ⁱⁱⁱ O’Meara, KerryAnn and Alan Bloomgarden, “The Pursuit of Prestige: The Experience of Institutional Striving from a Faculty Perspective,” *Journal of the Professoriate*, 4 no.1 (2011): 40. http://jotp.icbche.org/2011/4-1_Omeara_p39.pdf

^{iv} Robert J. Lemke, “Accounting for the Difference in PhD Creation Rates Across Liberal Arts Colleges,” (September 15, 2006): 2-3. <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/cheri/conferences/upload/2006/Lemke.pdf>

^v Thomas R. Cech, “Science at Liberal Arts Colleges: A Better Education?” *Daedalus*, Vol. 128, No. 1, Distinctively American: The Residential Liberal Arts Colleges (Winter, 1999): 195-216. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20027545>

^{vi} Stephanie Davis-Kahl, “Engaging Undergraduates in Scholarly Communication,” *C&RL News*, (April 2012): 212.

^{vii} Lynn O’Shaughnessy, “The Colleges Where PhD’s Get Their Start,” *The College Solution*, (January 26, 2012). <http://www.thecollegesolution.com/the-colleges-where-phds-get-their-start>

^{viii} John J. Siegfried and Wendy A. Stock, “The Undergraduate Origins of Ph.D. Economists,” Working Paper No. 06-W11. (May 2006). <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/econ/wparchive/workpaper/vu06-w11.pdf>

^{ix} Saphire, Diane. "Oberlin Group and PhD Recipients." Message to Diane Graves. 12 April, 2012. E-mail.

^x For a strong example of a successful repository at a small college, see the Digital Commons at Macalester College: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/>

^{xix} For more information on the Anvil project, see: <http://www.nitle.org/help/anvil.php>