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A Newcomer's Perspective on the Changing Academic Library: Library to Learning Commons

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Abstract

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Abstract

Academic libraries are undergoing a great deal of change as they transform themselves from a traditional library to a learning commons. These changes are driven by an increased focus on assessment, data-driven decisions, the need to reach students, and a focus on teaching information literacy. Library schools are responding to transformations in the field through changes in recruitment practices, advising strategies, technology integration, and curriculum. The combined goal of these activities is to ensure that schools can create a diverse group of graduates who are prepared to meet the pedagogical, technological, and administrative challenges of the changing academic library environment. Through partnerships library school faculty and practicing librarians can learn to create research, curriculum, and practical applications. Academic librarians and library school faculty should work together to create curriculum that is up-to-date and meets the needs of students who will enter the academic library field.

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A Newcomer's Perspective on the Changing Academic Library: Library to Learning Commons

The authors of this article have two unique perspectives on the changing academic library. One is a practitioner and one is a director of a library and information science program. Both authors are early in their careers and bring distinct viewpoints to the discussion of the changing academic library.

Academic Libraries

From the authors' perspective, change in the academic library is focused around five key areas. These areas are the creation of a learning commons, information literacy, assessment, data-driven decisions, and becoming outward facing. It is not new for academic libraries to move from a traditional library to a learning commons model, but more learning commons are incorporating academic support services, career services, and first year experiences. These additions expand the offerings of the learning commons and cause changes to the roles and functions of academic libraries.

Information Literacy

The Middle States Commission has led the way with information literacy being a student learning outcome. There was concern in early 2014, as it wasn't included in the initial revisions of the accrediting material, but information literacy will be placed back in the Middle States documentation after concern was expressed. For librarians, we need to be aware that Middle States is choosing to solely focus on this and not on the library in a broader sense (Evans, 2014). This should not be a surprise because accrediting bodies and the Common Core Standards are moving to competency-based and outcomes focused education.

The information literacy standards are being rewritten into an information literacy framework by a task force that was created by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) (ACRL, 2014). While the framework has not been officially released at the time of this publication, the move away from standards to a framework will redefine how we approach information literacy as a learning outcome. The framework allows librarians to claim information literacy as their discipline (Swanson, 2014) and not solely as a skill that is used in academic disciplines.

Assessment and Data-Driven Decisions

In the future, academic libraries will need to be intentional about assessment and making data-driven decisions. Cecelia Lopez the former associate director of the Higher Learning Commission stated that the academy can be successful with assessment if they use the following guidelines:

Assessment should be guided by a conceptual framework. Assessment activities should be envisioned and implemented according to a plan that is regularly reviewed and updated. Assessment activities must have ongoing commitment within the institution rather than occur as episodic events. Collecting, reviewing, analyzing, and utilizing the data from assessing students, programs, departments, and the college and university will result in improvements in student learning and institutional effectiveness. Institutions must have the intellectual and fiscal commitment to ensure the ongoing support of an assessment program. Integrating the results of assessment activities will result in improvement of student learning and, indirectly, the provision of library and other support services on campus. Communicating and clarifying the intent of the role of assessment for faculty and staff in improving instruction and informing institutional decision making will do much to decrease potential anxiety about the process. (as cited in Matthews, 2007, p. 4)

Data-driven decisions will help librarians demonstrate areas where they need funding and will assist them in building support among administration and stakeholders. Keeping statistics for assessment strategies will create an easier environment for decisions to be made that are driven by the data.

Outward Facing

Kranich, Lotts, and Springs (2014) discuss being outward facing instead of focusing on outreach. The focus of librarians should not be bringing the students to the library, instead, it should be providing resources to students at their point of need. Building connections and forming relationships will be vital to future libraries. The American Library Association's (ALA) Libraries Transforming Communities project and their partnership with the Hardwood Institute emphasizes the importance the field and national associations are placing on connecting with communities (ALA, 2014). Academic libraries are already engaging their community through embedded librarianship programs, marketing efforts, involvement in first year experiences, and in many other ways. Academic libraries will need to change by not solely engaging their communities through outreach efforts, but to instead face outward and be aware of what is happening in the community and by responding to needs by going out into the community. Librarians will need to be critical players in campus communities.

Library Schools

Such changes reveal a need for a shift in the makeup of new librarians and their professional preparation. This first change affects schools in terms of recruitment and admissions. Committing to the recruitment of students who have a propensity not just for learning but also for teaching, interactive in increasingly social environments, and being comfortable with technology is key.

Faculty and Curricular Changes

Once students are in the program there are a number of things advisors can do to make sure that students who are interested in academic libraries are prepared for that changing environment. Making strong recommendations to students about electives that emphasize teaching skills, assessment, and technology can help to better prepare MLS students for work in academic libraries.

Of the utmost importance is the role of the faculty. There are a number of things faculty members do to maintain a curriculum in ways that address changes in the library world. One of these is to develop a structured and consistent set of learning outcomes for core courses. This can allow them to ensure that students are getting more practice with teaching and technology throughout their courses in addition to gaining proficiency with all of the ALA core competencies.

Faculty can also make catalog changes. There are almost immediately implementable changes like the development of current issues courses. Current issues courses that are consistently reflective of more permanent changes in the field can later be made into permanent electives. An example from Emporia State University (ESU) is the folding of two metadata courses into the regular catalog. Faculty can also create electives that have not been current issues courses if there is consistent demand and an appropriate place in the curriculum.

The most foundational change faculty can make is a change to the core curriculum or required courses. An example of that from ESU is the removal of the Reference and User Services course from the core curriculum. That course was narrowly focused on traditional reference. With the integration of teaching and information literacy support skills in the other required courses, the

faculty at ESU decided that the course had outlived much of its usefulness. This was reflective of some of the changes they were seeing in academic libraries.

There are a number of things that can inform those curricular decisions. One of those things is new literature. Faculty can be aware of new literature through continued efforts to evaluate possible required readings for their courses. That helps subject specific content to be reflective of current environments. It is also possible to gain insight about library school as a whole by reviewing literature such as a 2013 article by Emanuel from the University of Illinois. In the article, Emanuel (2013) lists some of the results of a mixed methods study about digital native librarians and technology. New professionals were asked to rate themselves with regards to specific technology skills before library school, after library school, and at the present time (Emanuel, 2013). This is the kind of thing that can inform administrator and other curricular planners because it immediately says something about what students do not know, what they are not learning, and what they are not retaining. This is enormously useful in terms of self-reflection within the library school.

There are two figures from Emanuel's article that take the form of tag clouds showing responses to the questions "What other technologies do you want to learn?" (p. 24) and "What technologies will be most important to libraries in the next five years?" (p. 25). Even though the article only examines technology skills, it is a great example of the kind of reflective information that can be useful to library schools. Such information can be great for planners trying to identify curriculum shortcomings and for advisors creating degree plans.

Partnerships

Another great source of input that can keep a curriculum relevant is partnerships. One example in ESU's program is the use of adjunct faculty. This is built into the system of the department at ESU. Adjunct faculty at the university is primarily made up of current practitioners who teach many current issues courses and some core courses appropriate for their individual strengths and interests. The adjuncts can be instrumental in identifying and developing new current issues courses and also in providing input for restructuring core courses.

A more methodical form of partnership is the use of advisory boards. ESU's Master of Library Science (MLS) program administers advisory boards for the following geographical and subject areas:

- Oregon
- Utah
- Colorado
- Kansas
- Leadership and Administration
- Librarianship for Children and Young Adults
- Archives
- School Library Media
- National

These boards not only help them to address changes in the field but can also help the school to evaluate what has staying power and what is on the horizon. The boards can consist of prominent practitioners and stakeholders that have expertise in the geographic or subject area the board is

meant to address. The boards can meet with school administrators to discuss the curriculum, any gaps they might see, and any changes they might suggest.

Conclusion

Academic libraries are changing due demands from accrediting bodies, technology, and the needs of the campus community. The changes that are occurring in academic libraries have a direct impact on library schools. Schools that offer the masters of library science degree must consider how to stay current to ensure that their graduates receive a robust education. Maintaining current partnerships with practitioners in the field and having practitioners who are passionate about continuing education help to create environments where academic libraries can thrive and library schools can graduate new leaders in the field.

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