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Voices Versus Visions: A Commentary On Academic Library Collections And New Directions

By: **Allan Scherlen** and **Alex D. McAllister**

Abstract

Academic library collections are under pressure to follow dominant voices in the library world to redefine library missions and collections according to emerging trends in new library services. These trends call for a shift in focus away from traditional resource support for curriculum and research to new tech-related and other services. This sea-change in academic library function is led by the voices of major figures at library conferences and taken up by some library leaders who want to be on the cutting edge of reevaluating traditional academic library collections and the very essence of the mission of academic libraries. Thus, it is important to question dominant voices at library conferences, in published discourse, and among our colleagues so as to prevent the shaping of all libraries into a common mold of new services that can seem alluring but can potentially disconnect our libraries from their more fundamental role in supporting the research and curriculum of our institutions. Listening to the input of our faculty and student stakeholders, as well as balancing new roles with the value of foundational ones, are key to preserving our central importance to the university.

Voices Versus Visions: A Commentary on Academic Library Collections and New Directions

Allan Scherlen and Alex D. McAllister

Appalachian State University, Boone, NC, USA

ABSTRACT

Academic library collections are under pressure to follow dominant voices in the library world to redefine library missions and collections according to emerging trends in new library services. These trends call for a shift in focus away from traditional resource support for curriculum and research to new tech-related and other services. This sea-change in academic library function is led by the voices of major figures at library conferences and taken up by some library leaders who want to be on the cutting edge of reevaluating traditional academic library collections and the very essence of the mission of academic libraries. Thus, it is important to question dominant voices at library conferences, in published discourse, and among our colleagues so as to prevent the shaping of all libraries into a common mold of new services that can seem alluring but can potentially disconnect our libraries from their more fundamental role in supporting the research and curriculum of our institutions. Listening to the input of our faculty and student stakeholders, as well as balancing new roles with the value of foundational ones, are key to preserving our central importance to the university.

Introduction

One of the questions posed by *Collection Management* guest editor Michael Levine-Clark, Dean of University of Denver Libraries, was "…how do we make sure that we don't perpetuate the mistakes of the past by mainly collecting dominant voices?" This call for perspectives on the future of academic library collections can be read as more than a call for improved cultural diversity in our collections. Although diversity and inclusion efforts should continue to be integrated in how we develop collections, there are other "dominant voices" we should be concerned about as well — voices that can adversely affect our core mission to provide excellent resources to support the curricula and research of the university—namely the dominant voices of library administrators at major institutions who push for radical transformation of academic libraries too quickly or at the expense of

CONTACT Allan Scherlen scherlnag@appstate.edu

traditional collections and services. The trends currently shaping libraries toward new technology and the use of spaces shift the core mission of libraries away from important functions related to providing access to collected scholarship. Making such radical shifts unilaterally can lead to an unintended polarization between the library and campus constituents and unforeseen ill-effects on the university's research and reputation.

Although it is important for libraries to continue leading the way in innovation, it is perhaps more important now than ever for librarians to remember the core functions that have made our libraries central assets of higher education. These rapid changes in academic libraries are being shaped largely by the dominant visions of administrators rather than the faculty and student voices who actually use the library for research.

The dominant voices of library leaders

University libraries are under pressure to follow dominant voices in the library world to redefine academic library service missions and collections according to emerging trends in new services related to technology and other services not traditionally associated with libraries. This sea-change in academic library function is led by the dominant visions of major figures at library conferences and taken up by library directors who also seek to be on the cutting edge of altering the nature and very essence of the mission of academic libraries. This trend reinforces the belief that libraries will be saved from perceived, impending obsolescence.

An examination of published literature and online sources by and about university library directors over the past 15 years reveals some distinct trends in how library leaders are shifting their perceptions of the future of university library collections and services and thus having major impact on their library and, consequently, on the entire university it serves (Royal 2015). If the strategic direction of university libraries is guided to a great degree by the goals and priorities of their directors, then an examination of those values is warranted. It is important to assure a university library—under the direction of the library director's leadership—continues to properly align with the mission to serve the university's research and curricular needs. But a trend in current library leadership values and priorities can arguably become disconnected from the library's traditional service mission to university research. This trend is exemplified by the popularity among university library administrators to direct their libraries to repurpose budget funds and floor space away from traditional book and other tangible collections toward new services such as digital project services, local e-publishing, expanded media labs, and group project facilities (Blumenthal 2005; Gladden 2018).

The changing roles of academic libraries in the university

Over the past 15 years, university library administrators have professed at conferences, in white papers, and in other publications that the role of libraries in the university is changing. At the Roundtable on Technology and Change in Academic Libraries, convened by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) in 2006, there was already much discussion about making major transitions in academic library services, moving away from collections of books and other permanent scholarly resources to become gateways to online information sources as well as more involved in other technology services (Mueller 2018). Sandy et al., argued in 2014 that their science and engineering library responded to the changing role of their library when they "streamlined legacy operations and added new services such as specialized academic software and new technology" (Sandy, Krishnamurthy, and Scalfani 2014). Michalak noted major changes in university library services at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and the role of administrators in those changes: "The top [library] administration initiated change but it came from below as well" (Michalak 2012, 421). In an interview posted on *Higher Ed. Jobs* in 2015, the director of Brigham Young University Library noted that it is difficult to think of "an institutional entity (academic libraries) that has changed more radically in the last decade, and yet I think the next ten years will bring even greater changes" ("The Changing Roles of Academic and Research Libraries" n.d.). These perceptions of fundamental changes in the role of libraries in the university have affected how library directors perceive their role as leaders which in turn is further propelling those changes.

Academic library directors and their perceived role

University library directors are rapidly re-envisioning their libraries' role in the university. Consequentially, many directors are taking the initiative to put those visions of change into practice. Straumsheim reported that a survey conducted in 2016 showed that library directors are "becoming comfortable with the idea that the library may no longer be the starting point for research" and that "the distance between the library director and their immediate supervisors is growing" and that that the number of directors who share the same vision with the rest of their librarians is down 10% (Straumsheim 2017). This notion is of concern when we discover that new library directors may lack many of the leadership skills necessary to take on such bold initiatives. Harris-Keith found in her study that library directors often assume those positions without the needed leadership skills (Harris-Keith 2016). Nevertheless, we can find university libraries recruiting directors to lead them in transforming their libraries to encompass a broad

array of new services that were not previously considered within the domain of the university library.

These new library services, often touted as the library of the future, include repurposing space to provide new technology services such as 3-D printing and audio-visual labs (Jantz 2012; Royal 2015). A perusal of current job advertisements for library deans reveals wording that calls for persons who will be "transformative," "innovative," and/or "provide a clear vision of the evolving role of the libraries." Meanwhile, deans at major institutions are providing some of those transformative visions. For example, at last year's [2017] Charleston Library Conference, a white paper from Arizona State University Library, entitled, "The Future of the Academic Library Print Collection: A Space for Engagement" was prominently featured on the conference website and discussed throughout the conference. The dean behind the paper and major speaker of the conference, James O'Donnell, led the march at the conference for all to accept radical reduction of books in university libraries and to reinvent libraries as centers of new kinds of services ("2017 Charleston Library Conference" 2017; "The future of the academic library print collection: A space for engagement" 2017). Many current and future library deans at the conference were, no doubt, paying close attention to the call to follow the zeitgeist of library transformation and to remove low-use books from university library shelves. Statistics have shown some decline in book circulation statistics (Anderson, 2017). The decline in circulation of print books is in part due to the increase in library ebooks and easy availability of online resources. Conversely, an infographic by the Association of Research Libraries featuring Service Trends in ARL Libraries from 1991 to 2015 reveals a 129% increase in interlibrary borrowing (ARL 2015).

The discourse over low circulating books taking up valuable library space and rising discussion over the possibility for new library services in need of space are converging into a major trend of thinking among library deans and directors: Move low circulating books out of the library to make room for the library of the future. Universities that can afford off-site storage facilities can appease their book-dependent humanist faculty by archiving low-use monographs in off-site storage with promises of one- or two-day delivery (Acadia 2016). Still, many university library deans do not have off-site book storage facilities and decide to follow the lead to "weed" books to make room for new services, often to the dismay of history and literature scholars (Acadia 2016; Howard n.d.). "We're kind of like the living room of the campus," said Cheryl Middleton, Oregon State University Librarian and President of the Association of College and Research Libraries. "We're not just a warehouse" ("A library without books?" 2017). News sources and the library literature offer several examples where the library dean drove

their vision of library transformation, often at the expense of book resources valued by faculty in the humanities resulting in damage to the relations between the library and the university it is meant to serve (Howard n.d.; Melkier 2009; Straumsheim 2014, December 10).

These dominant voices, while often arguing reasonably for recovery of more study space from expanding print book collection areas and for taking steps to get inflationary and high-priced e-resources under control, also call for new services that shift the focus away from traditional resource support for curriculum and research to new tech-related, niche services. They see the new role of libraries as the hub of tech tools such as 3-D printing, makerspaces, robotics and craft shops, as well as the home for innovative classrooms and specialized study spaces while books are relegated to off-site storage or worse (Davis 2018). This is not to say academic libraries should ignore innovative technology services or e-resources. Nor is it to say libraries should not weed collections based on disciplinary differentiation. (McAllister and Scherlen 2017). In fact, new services, if managed carefully and implemented meaningfully, should become integrated into the library. However, we cannot forgo the perennial role of academic libraries in supporting their scholars with needed foundational materials such as books, journals and databases. The implications of focusing too heavily on emerging services can have a detrimental effect on collections. Moreover, we should be leery of following a single vision propelling the momentum of library change.

Many argue that while the number of library visitors seems steady or even growing, book circulation at university libraries has decreased (Anderson 2017). As Anderson notes, with increase in the number of e-books and other online resources, we can expect a decline in the circulation of print books. But there are also deeper studies such as Amy Fry's research on OhioLINK's circulation of books older than 70 years. She found that "low-circulating items do not necessarily reach a point where they become of no use" (Fry 2015, 6). Thus, the authors of this commentary ask that librarians seek to balance maintaining excellent collections with adopting new services in a manner that keeps in mind their mission to serve university research and to consult fully with faculty constituents. Diverting budget funds from book and even inflationary e-journal collections to new library services in a unilateral way can not only have ill-effects on local researchers but also on the university community by affecting program accreditation or even university ranking (Hazelkorn 2009).

Seeking the equilibrium of past and future library functions

We must seek equilibrium where the library of the future meets its faculty and student needs with materials of various formats, including but not

limited to print and e-books, online journals, digital resources, special collections and emerging tech-tools depending on the specific needs, of course, of each institution. Thus, it is important to question dominant voices at library conferences, in published discourse, and other venues so as to prevent the shaping of all libraries into a common mold of new services and to avoid diminishing the quality of the library collection that serves program accreditation, university reputation, and ranking. Hot trends can seem alluring, but when not implemented with careful measure, our libraries' more fundamental role in supporting the research, curriculum and even competitive standing of our institutions can be adversely affected.

Conclusion

University libraries, like other organizations that serve the needs of a larger body (i.e., the university community), must remain attuned to their constituents' needs, both continuing and emergent. Library leadership has an obligation to keep a balanced perspective on what collections their students and faculty need and what new services can be integrated into their offerings to the benefit of the community they serve. Listening to the voices of our faculty and student stakeholders, as well as balancing new visions with the value of traditional roles are key to preserving our central importance to the university.

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