Support for the Research Process
An Academic Library Manifesto

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When we shift our attention from "save ~~newspapers~~ libraries" to "save ~~society~~ scholarship", the imperative changes from "preserve the current institutions" to "do whatever works." —Adapted from Clay Shirky[2]

NOTA BENE: This document does not encompass all the traditional roles of academic libraries (e.g., selection, cataloging, circulation, course support, etc.), but focuses on roles the academic library could assume in order to better support the research process.

Scholarly communication and practice have undergone radical transformations in recent years. Developments such as cloud computing, open access publishing and online social networking are affecting research practices. Researchers are asking a wider range of questions, using diverse data and methods, producing new forms of scholarly output, and engaging in innovative new forms of research and publication.

The enticing opportunities in digital research and scholarship are coupled with new challenges for the research community. 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. The choices these researchers make have implications on intellectual ownership, potential audience, ways of measuring impact, potential re-use, and long-term preservation.

As budgets across higher education are shrinking, some in the academy are questioning the continued value of large academic libraries. At the same time, many academic libraries are providing vital and innovative services and resources in support of emerging forms of research, publishing, and information management. While some would argue that academic libraries are playing an increasingly important role in scholarly research, others fear that they are on the brink of extinction and must change radically to survive. It's time to rise above the debate, and take a fresh look at the role of academic libraries in supporting research.

Call to Action

In order to continue to play a central role in support of scholarly research and publishing, academic libraries must:

1. Commit to continual study of the ever-changing work patterns and needs of researchers; with particular attention to disciplinary and generational differences in adoption of new modes of research and publication.
2. Design flexible new services around those parts of the research process that cause researchers the most frustration and difficulty.
3. Embed library content, services, and staff within researchers' regular workflows; integrating with services others provide (whether on campus, at other universities, or by commercial entities) where such integration serves the needs of the researcher.

4. Embrace the role of expert information navigators and redefine reference as research consultation instead of fact-finding.
5. Reassess all library job descriptions and qualifications to ensure that training and hiring encompass the skills, education, and experience needed to support new modes of research.
6. Recognize that discovery of content will happen outside of libraries—but that libraries are uniquely suited to providing the organization and metadata that make content discoverable.
7. Embrace opportunities to focus on unique, core services and resources; while seeking collaborative partnerships to streamline common services and resources.
8. Find ways to demonstrate to senior university administrators, accreditors, and auditors the value of library services and resources to scholarship; while providing services that may seem invisible and seamless to researchers.
9. Engage researchers in the identification of primary research data sets that merit long-term preservation and access.
10. Offer alternative scholarly publishing and dissemination platforms that are integrated with appropriate repositories and preservation services.

In the midst of rapid and often unpredictable change, academic libraries can retain their position as critical partners in the research enterprise by anticipating, understanding, and addressing the challenges and opportunities inherent in new research practices. If academic libraries heed these calls to action, they will be able to ensure that current and future researchers will have the support they need to navigate and exploit the full potential of evolving digital scholarship.

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[2] Shirky, Clay. 2009. "Newspapers and Thinking the Unthinkable," Clay Shirky [blog] Friday, March 13th. Available online at: http://www.shirky.com/weblog/2009/03/newspapers-and-thinking-the-unthinkable/.