

## The Relevance of Academic Libraries in the Twenty-First Century

By Eric Jennings

### ABSTRACT

The biggest challenge facing the library profession in the twenty-first century is staying relevant to its users. It is often stated that the Internet and Google have changed librarianship. This challenge, while significant, does not mean that libraries will go away. It is causing us to re-evaluate what we do, how we do it, and what role libraries have in the academy and in our culture at large. This column addresses some of the ways in which academic libraries can stay relevant throughout the twenty-first century.

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## INTRODUCTION

The question of the relevance of libraries is not a new phenomenon. While I was in library school in the mid-2000s, we read Lancaster's 1978 article entitled "Whither Libraries? Or Wither Libraries?" (Lancaster 1978). In the article, Lancaster describes the nascent paperless communication system that he sees replacing the paper-based communication of information. Describing the reasons for the switch and the costs involved, he asks if libraries and librarians are going to wither away and die or whether they are going to notice that the times are changing and do something about it. The issues Lancaster describes are the same today as they were thirty-four years ago. Now, we are wondering how Google's digitization efforts, the Kindle, iPad, and Nook, and various other commercial ebook readers and tablet devices will affect libraries. Furthermore, we are trying to reconcile how ebooks from commercial vendors like Ebook Library (EBL) and Ebrary will change how we provide access to information to our users. We forget that libraries have already gone through a huge transition from paper-based journal subscriptions to curating electronic access to journals. That prior experience will serve us well as we continue to transition to more electronic content and less physical content. But, before I paint too rosy a picture, I know that there will be bumps along the way.

Change is difficult; librarians are especially subject to the difficulties presented by the rapid change in technology, because our traditional roles are keeping and providing access to information for our campus and community. Today's academic libraries must be more than just a curatorial service for our universities and colleges; otherwise, our budgets will continue to stay flat or be cut. Furthermore, as libraries move away from the physical curation of materials to the managing of electronic content, others on campus will see the value of the physical space that we have, and parts of our buildings will be subject to occupation by external departments. In other words, we (librarians and library organizations) have to prove to our stakeholders that we are relevant in the digital age. We know that libraries are relevant, of course, but just because we say something is true does not make it necessarily so. I propose that we counter this challenge to our relevance with three Es: Engage, Educate, and Empower. First, let's take a look at Engage.

## ENGAGE YOUR USERS

I am no longer surprised when the question of the relevance of the modern library comes up in casual conversations with faculty and students or family and friends. People who say, "The library is unnecessary because you can find everything on the Internet," do not have an accurate picture of what we as librarians and library organizations are doing. Immediately jumping into a defensive posture and telling these individuals why they are incorrect is the wrong approach to this situation. Why? People do not want to be told that they are wrong. If they are not open to learning about today's modern library, it is simply going to go in one ear and out the other. How do we reconcile this difference of opinion? We must engage our users.

The first of the Es—engage—is the idea that we need to work with the user population that we have (undergraduates, faculty, staff, community members, etc.) and simply get them engaged in the library. What does this mean for us as academic librarians? Engaging our user population can be as simple as providing a twenty-four-hour study space for students during finals week or offering classes to faculty on how to use a citation management software package. However, for

outsiders viewing the twenty-first century academic library as increasingly irrelevant, we have to do more than offer traditional library services. For example, where I currently work, one of the ways that we engage with students is through an annual event at the beginning of the school year in which we have games, pizza, mini golf, and various other events that bring students into the library. Although we have done this only for two years, it has been a huge success both times.

The library director and I do not deem the beginning-of-the-year party a success only because hundreds of students come to the library on the second night of fall semester classes. It was a success because we did something to engage the students and to break down a barrier between the library and students. Because most of the students who come to this event are freshmen, this small gesture will serve us well as they continue their matriculation at the university. Rather than having students perceive the library as a stuffy place that simply houses books and journals for their research and has shushing librarians, we did something for students that breaks that stereotype and makes the building more of their place rather than a sacred space. I am not suggesting that the library does not or should not do the things that it is best suited to do: collecting, cataloging, and providing information to its users. I am suggesting, however, that the two roles of the library as (1) the repository of knowledge and (2) a place for students are not mutually exclusive.

The second reason that the party was a success is that it got students into the library; while they were waiting for the pizza or mini golf clubs, they walked around the library and discovered things that they did not know we had. A number of students were shocked at how many CDs and DVDs we had. Some students even left the event with a stack of items in hand only to come back later for the event itself. By getting our users into the library (i.e., engaging them) for something that may seem trivial, we were able to show them that we are more than just books or whatever the common misconception may be. This step in the right direction shows students that we can provide them with access to information that they want, whether it is scholarly or not.

Because the library staff (students, paraprofessionals, librarians, and the library director) work at and host this party, attendees have positive memories of us as individuals. They may not know our names, but they know that we work in the library. As they used to say in G.I. Joe cartoons, knowing is half the battle. In our case, having students know that we are not the stereotypical stuffy librarians that the media portrays us to be but, rather, people willing to do something out of the ordinary for students, will break down the barrier between students and librarians. This is especially important for students, because admitting that they have an information need or deficiency can be difficult. However, after you have seen someone in a not-so-official librarian capacity encouraging you to play mini-golf in the library, you will undoubtedly find him or her more approachable at the reference desk.

Other examples of things that we have done at McIntyre Library to engage students include having puzzles and board games in the library as well as an exercise room with treadmill, elliptical, and stationary bike. The puzzles and games are there for students to work a different part of their brains and to give them a break from memorizing facts. These activities are also great for socialization purposes. The exercise machines are for students to burn off some excess energy, get their blood flowing, or just to take a break during the day. During finals week, we have a library dance party at midnight, and we bring in therapy dogs for students to pet. If dogs

can reduce stress in United States Army soldiers returning from a war zone, we think that they can help students with their stressors, too (Thompson 2010). While such student engagement techniques may not seem like things that the typical academic library should be doing, we have to be creative when competing for students' attention in the information age. Without doing something that differentiates us from the stereotype of the library as a cold, lifeless place, students will continue to see the library as a cold, lifeless place where students go to sleep.

Don't get the idea that engagement is all fun and games, even though it has been a great way to engage with students in our library. Moreover, engagement is not just for students. A different way that the library can engage its users is by hosting events. For example, one thing that I have done in collaboration with two of my librarian colleagues and the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) is to host a discussion group during the semester for faculty and staff. These discussions use TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) videos to jumpstart a discussion surrounding the topic presented in the video. However, it is more than just the discussion that is important. Much like the beginning-of-the-year celebration, this is an attempt to put a face to the library. Many faculty members and staff only interact with the library through its Website. By having video discussions on topics ranging from Larry Lessig talking about copyright to a presentation by Jesse Schell on how games are invading our lives, we strive to get faculty and staff with varied interests to stop what they are doing and discover that the world is larger than their slice of expertise. This event also allows the library to introduce attendees to library resources on that week's topic and meet with them on neutral ground, because we co-host these events in CETL. One of the outcomes of this engagement is that we have been asked by some faculty to go to their classrooms to host a similar discussion for their students, while other faculty have integrated these videos into their curriculum as a teaching tool. Part of engagement, in my opinion, is introducing yourself to others. This type of engagement puts a face on the library for faculty and staff. Rather than sitting and twiddling our thumbs waiting for someone to talk to us, we are active in engaging and getting to know our users. When it comes time for tough decisions to be made because of budgetary restraints, we can converse with faculty in a more comfortable and friendly manner because we have gotten to know each other, even if just a little.

I have written a lot about engaging with your user population. The reason I am listing different examples of how we have engaged with our users is because it is especially difficult to educate your users and empower them if they are not engaged in your library. After you have engaged with your constituency, you have a hook from which you can start to educate them on the relevance of the library. In other words, they are more likely to listen to you because they like you or what you do for them. It may be sad to some that we have to market ourselves like this, but we excel at providing our users with something that Google cannot: personal attention.

## EDUCATE YOUR USERS

As you think about the relevance of the library and talk about it with your constituents, an inevitable question comes up from those outside the library: why does the library need a building if everything is becoming digital? There are many libraries around the country that are going "bookless" these days, but before we get rid of all of the books and journals from our libraries and move to a completely digital library, we need to describe the situation of digitized items to those who question the utility of the library building storing all those physical items. First, most

of the items we have in our physical library collections are not available digitally, which is the primary reason we need a building. Secondly, many of the digitized items are not owned by libraries; they are leased. This is especially true of journal articles. Educational moments like these are a great way for us as librarians to talk about the problem of the information age: we have access to so much information, but we do not own it.

Because the library provides access to so much information online, many of our users may get to it from services like Google or Google Scholar without knowing that the library is the one that has paid for it. Instead, it seems like it is freely available on the Internet. That is obviously not the case. We need to do a better job at making sure that we brand our resources so that our users know that the library is the one that provides access to the information. If we do not, we perpetuate the notion that the information our users need truly is available online for free making them question the relevance of the library.

Even if our users know we provide access to the high-quality information resources they want, the cost of that access will continue to rise for libraries. Unfortunately, with flat/reduced budgets in many libraries' futures, at some point, something will have to give. In other words, libraries will have to make significant cuts to the high-quality information resources to which its users expect to have access. A graph showing the expenditures from ARL (Association of Research Libraries) libraries on monographs and serials describes how the cost of these items has gone up in price from 1986 to 2003 (The Scholarly Publishing & Academic Resources Coalition 2012). The information, although a bit dated, is still relevant. In the case of serials expenditures, the unit cost has gone up over 200 percent, with the consumer price index only going up 68 percent. The average user of your college's library (faculty or student) would probably be shocked that serials have increased at such a high rate but would not appreciate the implication of the increase. Why? Because libraries have always provided access to the things that its users needed. A more recent report from 2011 detailed that the average cost of a *single* chemistry journal was over \$4,000 (Bosch, Henderson, and Klusendorf 2011). Most colleges that have general education requirements in the sciences will have faculty who need these journals for their own research or for accreditation purposes. When talking with others about the cost of information problem, I usually try to put it into perspective (i.e., educate them) so that it is more accessible. Thus, if a personal subscription to the same average chemistry journal is only a tenth of what it costs a library, that same subscription would cost \$400. Few individuals can afford to pay for multiple subscriptions to these costly journals. Because of that high cost, it makes sense for libraries to collect these resources. However, libraries have to think about the costs rising each year. In five years, that same chemistry journal may be more than \$5,000. Again, this problem is exacerbated by flat or reduced budgets in the face of a demand from users who want access to more information.

Educating our user population on the cost of information is just one part of the education that needs to take place for our constituencies. Another reason we still need libraries around is that there are often major restrictions on what information a library is able to share when it comes in digital format. Libraries are already restricted in what content they are able to share with other institutions through licensing agreements made with database providers and journal publishers. At the time of this article's writing (mid-2012), I believe that, until there is a cost-saving subscription for books that allows for easy lending of digital copies and unlimited downloading,

we will continue to collect, catalog, and store these physical items in libraries around the country. With physical copies of books, at least we know that we own the items and can lend them to others. It certainly does not make librarians feel any more at ease when the number of times a book can be downloaded is seemingly arbitrarily set at twenty six by some companies. Some might point out that with journal aggregators like JSTOR, we do not have to worry about losing access to digital copies of journal articles. Nevertheless, after Science Magazine ceased archiving its journal in JSTOR, it makes librarians leery to put all of our eggs in the digitization basket. Furthermore, because we have not yet come up with one solution for digital access and storage for journal articles, it only makes sense that these same issues have not been resolved for electronic book content. Unfortunately, as with many of the issues that I have written about so far, those outside the library do not know what we are doing (e.g., Hathi Trust) to help preserve content and address libraries' concerns.

Talking with users about the leasing model, licensing agreements problems, and preservation methods inevitably leads into a discussion of copyright and open access. Even though many books scanned by Google are currently available digitally, we do not have access to them because of copyright limitations. A quick and simple definition of the limits of copyright and how post-1923 works are covered under copyright (i.e., not available freely on the Internet) usually allows me to segue into a discussion of open access. Many students are shocked at how much database and journal subscriptions cost; thus, they realize the benefit of open access for books and journals. Talking to students about these alternative publishing arrangements, including archiving in institutional repositories, is an important step in making information accessible, because today's students are the faculty of the future. Additionally, they often take the information that they learn back to their peers and professors. It is self-serving on our part to educate students about open access and institutional repositories; however, a good teacher prepares his or her student for the realities of the world. For better or worse, our reality is that, while digitization is great, the average user is not going to have access to the materials available on the Web. Beyond talking to students about copyright restrictions and open access, the library should also be educating its faculty about open access. Hosting open access week events is an important step in raising the profile of open access on campus. The library should also model the spirit of open access by signing an open access declaration as a unit on campus, as we have done at McIntyre Library. Finally, librarians should work with the campus' research office to educate those faculty who are writing grants so that they know how and why it is important to include money in the grant application for publishing in an open access journal.

The second E, educate, can mean more than just the verb, when it comes to the relevance of the twenty-first century academic library. We need to educate people about the necessity of the library as a place where collaboration and learning (i.e., education) takes place. It truly is one of the hallmarks of the library as an institution on campus. When people are looking for a place to study or do their research, they often come to the library, both physically and virtually. Even though a lot of what happens in the library is class-related, a lot of the learning that happens is also organic. By organic, I mean that students may come to the library for a particular purpose but end up learning about something entirely different because their interest is piqued by something they read or from a conversation that they have with their peers. I've heard students say that they go to the library to "get in the zone," and when they are in the zone, they are apt to explore things that interest them not only through artificial means (i.e., research assignments) but

also because they have an innate desire to learn. I like to think of the library as the modern-day salon where ideas are shared, debated, and discovered. Of course, the library is also used for things like checking e-mail, Facebook, and wasting time in general. However, the fact remains that the library is a place where a lot of learning takes place.

How can we take advantage of this salon atmosphere and promote the relevance of the library? One way is to sponsor research awards for students. Many libraries are already doing this. A quick Google search yields Michigan, Washington, and Oregon as three university libraries that make undergraduate research awards. Another way is to host art exhibitions in the library. At McIntyre Library, we hold at least two art showings per year. While this may not be an example of traditional learning through books and articles, it does provide a touchstone upon which the entire student body can reflect and talk about work by their peers. It is also good for the library because it brings in a group of students who do not have as much of the “traditional” book and article research assignments as their peers. Libraries should also encourage the salon atmosphere by including in their space an area for tutoring. At McIntyre Library, we recently remodeled part of the second floor to move the university writing center into the library. Library staff had noticed over the years that groups of individuals would gather in the library for study sessions. Adding the writing center to the library provides these groups with a dedicated space that they can use after normal business hours for these tutoring sessions.

Libraries need to highlight the intentional learning that takes place in library instruction classes, in addition to the organic learning that occurs among students of inquiring minds. When faculty members have classes that need to do research, we are asked to go to the classroom or take them to our classroom lab to describe the information that is available to them in print and online. Many times, bringing classes of students into the library and walking them through the stacks and/or having them for a class and pointing them to physical resources available in house and those online is a big part of their educational experience. It is one thing to say, “Here is a list of items for your class,” but it is an entirely different thing to say, “Here are some things that I have selected for your class; let’s take a look at these items and see how they can be used for your research.” One of the things that I try to do in all of my classes is to talk with students about how to use the great resources we have for them to their fullest capacity.

## EMPOWERING YOUR USERS

Using information to its fullest capacity brings me to the last of the Es—empower. Empowering our users to understand information is one of the most difficult things that we do. However, the library is really the best place for this empowering to take place. A different way to say this would be to say that we are teaching people information literacy. When thinking back to the misconception that everything is on the Internet, we know that this statement is false. Even if it were true, libraries still would be able to add value to the information that is available freely because they organize the information for easier access. Google is good at some things, but it is not good at everything. A perfect example of this is when doing research on Google for Martin Luther King. Many students are stunned that one of the first results is from a white supremacist group. As there is an inherent trust of Google being the arbiter of good information, empowering users to understand how to evaluate and properly use information will allow them to see that Google is not the be-all and end-all to their needs. If you were to do that same search in a

library's catalog, you certainly would not get a white supremacist group's book in the top five results on Martin Luther King because of good cataloging.

Another problem with trusting Google for all your information needs is that one of the first results on many Google searches is Wikipedia. Teaching students that Wikipedia may be a good place to start research but that it is not the only place to do research is an empowering teaching technique. Fortunately (or unfortunately, depending on how you look at it), students are still taught that Wikipedia is a bad resource to use. As a librarian, if I have students who have been told that Wikipedia is bad, then I have an opportunity to empower them on the proper way to use the information that is held within a Wikipedia article. Empowering students to use Wikipedia properly is more than a simple one-time affair in which a student says, "Oh, that makes sense." It also helps them to realize that all of the information they encounter has to go through a process of evaluation and understanding before one can rely on it as gospel truth. When talking about Wikipedia, I usually contrast that with an actual encyclopedia and tell students how similar they are. It is not just about how the information in a Wikipedia article or encyclopedia is a starting point; it is also about using it for the references to further one's research. Once students are able to make that conceptual leap, you are able to get them to see that Wikipedia articles are not the only information sources they need to evaluate thoroughly before use. They need to understand, evaluate, and effectively use all types of information, regardless of its origin.

Users who have been engaged and educated become empowered advocates for the library. Once they have grasped the costs involved with collecting and maintaining access to information in physical or digital formats, those with whom we have a good relationship can talk with their peers about the problems libraries are facing in the twenty-first century, while stressing the importance of the services they provide. Similarly, empowering library users through information literacy highlights the importance of what libraries do that Google cannot do: provide personal attention to those who seek and use information in *all* of its different formats.

## CONCLUSION

Creating and having advocates outside one's own library has ramifications beyond the immediate campus and community. Students go on to graduate schools elsewhere, and faculty come and go. If we all do a little bit more to help impress upon others why our libraries are still relevant, we will be better off when we have to justify every dollar and cent that is spent on the library. More importantly, these engaged, educated, and empowered users will know why everything is not on the Internet and why modern academic libraries are still relevant in the twenty-first century.

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