

Environmental Scan

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One thing I discovered from studying the history of academic libraries is that they are almost always changing to better fit their users and the academic world around them. Therefore, it is no surprise that much of the current analyses and predictions for academic libraries involve changing expectations and environments. There seemed to be three major trends that stood out in the materials designated for this assignment: financial difficulties, greater accountability, and technology. Each of these provides reasons for the evolution of academic libraries, but altogether they bring them to a point where decisions and changes must come very quickly.

One of the most pressing matters affecting academic libraries today is the results of one of the worst economic downturns seen in United States history. Libraries are being forced to compete for a shrinking pool of resources, as every aspect of the academic institution is being affected by budgetary problems. One of the top trends of 2010 library literature, as stated by the ACRL Research, Planning, and Review Committee, is that budget “problems will continue and libraries will evolve as a result” (2010). This is a problem that will likely not end soon even as the economy begins its slow recovery. It will take a while before academic finances return to their original level, and then it is questionable whether academic libraries will regain what they have lost. In order to continue, academic libraries will need to determine how to do more with less. One way this will happen is by librarians having more varied responsibilities in the library. The current ways of providing service to library users will no longer apply. They will need to “broaden their portfolio of skills to provide services to users” (ACRL Research, Planning, and Review Committee, 2010). The lines between the traditional departments will blur and the

specialization of academic librarians will be based more on academic discipline than skills and responsibilities.

Another trend that is occurring and will have an impact on the academic library environment is the expectation for greater accountability. As the economy improves and funding hopefully returns to libraries, the use of that funding will be closely watched. The ACRL Research Committee stated in its 2007 environmental scan that, “Higher education will be increasingly viewed as a business, and calls for accountability and for quantitative measures of library contributions to the research, teaching, and service missions of the institution will shape library assessment programs and approaches the allocation of institutional resources.” Libraries will no longer be considered an automatic foundational part of the campus, but will instead need to provide measurable evidence of their value to the academic community. The responsibilities of the librarians will shift in a way to make performance evaluation easier and more quantitative. New assessment models will also develop to help determine the effect the library is having on the community and what ways it can improve that effect.

Finally, there is the ever present specter of technological change that will continue to influence academic libraries in the immediate and far futures. Technology has served as a double-edged sword for libraries. It has, and will continue to, benefit them by breaking down barriers to access to information and by providing digital solutions to the problems of storing growing library collections. Throughout the readings there have been references to the digitization efforts made by many libraries, and the increasing amounts of unique material they are making available online. One potential scenario proposed by the Association of Research Libraries for the future of research libraries even has future scholars being aligned around data

stores “that address large-scale research questions within their research fields” (Howard, 2010). While this scenario suggests limits to the extents of research topics, it does emphasize the growing importance of these digitization efforts. Technology, through the development of more powerful personal computers and handheld technologies is also driving the evolution of library services. Library users will be able to reach further out into the virtual world to access their desired information, and libraries must be able to place themselves effectively in the world to have the most impact. Still currently there are “challenges in determining which tools to use” to accomplish this, and “how many resources to devote,” and, in reference to the previous section, “how to assess effectiveness” (ACRL Research, Planning, and Review Committee, 2010).

One way that academic libraries will be able to better adapt to the changes as they move into the future is to increase their outreach to other agencies and services on campus. One idea predicted by the ACRL Research Committee in 2008 is that “library facilities and services will become increasingly integrated with research, teaching, and learning programs across campus” (p. 5). Already libraries are beginning to ally themselves with various services on campus, like writing and tutoring centers and career planning services. These sorts of alliances will likely continue and grow as it provides a way for the different agencies to work together to improve services to the campus while managing with limited resources.

The road forward for academic libraries is going to be a difficult one, filled with a good deal of uncertainty and extensive changes. It is important to be able to understand the pressures that are being placed on the libraries today, and to determine the most effective way to manage them and continue to provide necessary services to the campus. One benefit to the economic downturn and the challenges it offers is that it has forced the academic library community to

evaluate its place on the campus and in the minds of the students, faculty, and administration.

The academic libraries are required to look beyond their walls and find the best ways for them to continue to serve.

References

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