**Call to Action: Creating Tomorrow’s Libraries Today**

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Upon retirement, a person inevitably looks both backward and forward. I am no exception; I am looking back over almost forty years of directing libraries at four universities with some degree of nostalgia. I have had a wonderful career filled with rewarding experiences, some notable successes—as well as some notable failures—and a plethora of wonderful colleagues and friends. I set out to become a historian and instead ended up a librarian by necessity. And although I slid into this profession sideways, I have never regretted it. Indeed, I am grateful that I could not find a job teaching history. Following my own path, I have enjoyed a career that allowed me to develop a broader understanding of higher education and to travel the world in pursuit of collaboration.

As I look back at the changes in higher education and libraries during my career, I realize what a captive audience we enjoyed for so many years. For most academic disciplines, the library was truly the center of the academic enterprise in many ways. Knowledge was contained in books and journals that were collected and housed in libraries. Faculty members conducting research and students completing class assignments and writing their term papers all had to come to us for the raw materials of that work. We were at the center of the entire academic enterprise, and everyone at a university appreciated us. We held the keys to unlocking the treasures we stored. Librarians designed the systems by which books and journals were organized, and locating pertinent knowledge resources was our specialty. Who could truly understand a card catalog—or a periodical index—better than a librarian? Most faculty members would miss important material without the assistance of a good reference librarian or bibliographer. College presidents would wax eloquently about the library as the heart of a campus, arguing that no fine university could exist without a great library! And for the most part, we received differential funding to maintain our collections, if not our services. If our funding was in jeopardy, we had library committees composed of faculty who would storm the citadel if need be to make sure the library budget was maintained. It really did not matter how “user friendly” our libraries were, since students had to use them regardless. We knew what was best for students and would arrange our libraries and array our services to meet their needs, whether they were pleased or disappointed with the outcome. We really did not measure how well they understood our jargonized signage or complicated cataloging rules. We simply perched ourselves behind desks and waited until the inevitable happened: our users would become confused and frustrated trying to help themselves and ultimately would seek our help. The wise ones started with us!

We lost that captive audience with the advent of technology and the World Wide Web, which enabled the growth of alternative information sources to proliferate. I remember that my first copy of Mosaic (precursor to Google) would not work on my office computer because the systems librarian had stripped Windows from our devices because it was a memory hog! At that time, we had no idea how our world was about to change radically. Today, large portions of our print books are in high-density storage and our journals are mostly electronic. Our buildings are open all night and reference desks are disappearing altogether. The library is no longer defined as a building but a ubiquitous service, and our card catalog cabinets are mostly filled with nuts and bolts in workshops far away or converted into TV stands. Today, searching for books and journals is done by typing a keyword into single search box. That simple command will return results from books and individual journal articles and other sources in a single array that can then be narrowed. Gone are the LC Subject Heading books that were the keys to the catalog. And with them, gone is the necessity of consulting a librarian to unlock knowledge sources! We are now struggling with relevance in a way that libraries have never struggled before. In the eyes of some disciplines, we are irrelevant and all but forgotten. We are closing departmental libraries, and almost no one notices. We are delivering print books and pushing electronic books and journal articles to faculty members so often they no longer need to walk to the library to find materials. The once tedious and lengthy interlibrary loan process is now so facilitated that we are in effect creating virtual collections of tens of millions of volumes. Once dependent on the expertise of scholarly bibliographers to select books for a collection, we now have the ability to load records for books as they are published and then purchase only books that are used online. Instead of buying books in case someone might need them in the future, we can purchase books that we know are relevant and used from day one. Even small campuses have access to vastly more resources than before. No one makes speeches pointing to the library as the heart of the university.

So what are we doing about all of this change? How are we going to maintain our centrality to the learning and research processes? How can we rebuild our libraries as places and services so that they are once again indispensable to the campus?

Well, of course, we are doing this now—but we are not rebuilding alone or in a vacuum. Instead, we are in constant touch with those same users who we once assumed did not know enough to have a valid opinion about library services. We are redesigning library spaces in collaboration with many other groups on campus to make them hubs of activity and learning. We got rid of the “no’s” in our building and allow food and drink. In fact, we have cafes in which drink and food are actually served. We build media production labs and high tech group study rooms to encourage activities and group discussions that we once prohibited because of the noise they generated. We keep our libraries open longer. As a consequence of these changes, libraries are more popular with students than ever. But what students are doing in our libraries is radically different from the past.

Frankly, we are still trying to build a mission for libraries in the future. What is our role? How is it different—or the same--as in the past? As I look backward and forward, I am quite optimistic that the future of library services is bright and that we will succeed in reinventing ourselves. But to do it well, we must be willing—and even eager—to question old assumptions and break down traditional models. We must in effect reengineer our operations and services to free up the resources we need to meet the challenges ahead. We must train “librarians” in a different way with different expertise in order to play roles in data curation, open access publishing, or digital humanities, or any number of emerging areas in which we will not be the only players. We must become indispensable partners. We must change the culture of libraries to embrace change and to manage it. We must seek our potential partners on our campuses and forge meaningful collaboration that allows us to embed our services and expertise into courses, not simply as an insert but as an integral part of the entire course. We must become members of research teams and digital humanities projects, providing infrastructure support and expertise to facilitate this research and then provide platforms for its dissemination. We must develop cultures of assessment to guide our decisions and better understand our impact. Mostly, we must redefine the library to overcome our association in the popular mind with stacks of books that are becoming passé. I openly tell faculty members that I don’t love books, but as a medievalist, I prefer vellum! Books are containers as were scrolls before them and digital files are now. The containers are not important. It is the knowledge they contain that we are about.

If we do not build the library for the future, it will be built for us and we may not enjoy the product. It is imperative that we define our future—and that we do it so well that the library recaptures its place as the true heart of the university.