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connected to wireless sensors that pick up on environmental conditions and then make adjustments for optimal performance. Using this technology, for example, lights would automatically turn off when a room becomes empty.” Their business plan had been entered in — and won — several case competitions. In 2007, the students used Google to find a market research report which the library eventually purchased for them. A year later, this same group of students approached four different librarians — the instruction librarian, one of the reference librarians, the collection development librarian, and the library director — with a request to purchase two new reports for their project.

In his meeting with this group about their project request, the collection development librarian used the standard reference interview process to ask them what they needed the reports for and where they had already looked for the information they were seeking. The students believed the reports in question had market forecasts for energy harvesting devices — how many could be expected to be sold in the next decade and what the price per unit could be expected to be. However, thinking that the library had that information and knowing that they did were not the same. Researchers using traditional library collections — material the library has already purchased and made available — often search the collections to determine whether a research question can be answered. (For example, in another case study, a doctoral student was looking for energy capacity and production statistics for each state from the 1940s through the 1960s and the collection development librarian retrieved a serial from off-site storage which the student examined to determine if it had the information he was looking for.) The difference between the request of the doctoral student and the request of the students working on the business plan is that the documents the business plan students requested were not already part of the library’s collection. It would have cost the library nearly five thousand dollars to purchase the documents just for the students to see if they could use the information in them. (In fact, when the students were asked about the report the library had purchased them the previous year, they stated that that report did not have the information they were looking for.) Fifteen years ago, the students would probably not have known that these documents even existed; now, they were able to identify these documents just by typing a few keywords into Google.

After this discussion about the online reports, the collection development librarian asked the students if they had looked in any of the library’s collections (print or electronic) to see if the information they were looking for existed in material the library had already acquired and made available. The students explained that their research question was unique enough that it would probably not be answered by any materials already held by the library, but it was much easier for them to use Google to identify the information they were looking for than to do a thorough search of the library’s resources to determine whether the library had the information or not. This difference between the difficulty of using the library’s finding tools to determine whether or not a piece of information exists in its collection and the ease of using Google to determine whether or not that same piece of information exists on the World Wide Web should prompt libraries to seriously consider structuring their finding tools in such a way that they can lead users to information — or show users that a piece of information does not exist — with the same ease as Google.

After discussing the resources in which the students had expressed interest, the collection development librarian asked if they had received any venture capital with which to purchase the reports. Projects in which business students are involved are sometimes unique in that they have a dual purpose — the same project can be part of an action based learning exercise as well as the beginning stages of a commercial enterprise on which the student plans to embark after graduation. In this case, the students had written a business plan that was winning case competitions (an academic exercise) but also served as a foundation for a potential business endeavor (an entrepreneurial effort). The library’s mission is to support Ross constituents in their academic endeavors, but it is not a business incubator or a fund for start-up businesses. In the end, the students said that they did not have any venture capital because their business was not yet at that stage of development. (Another library staff member pointed out that in many case competitions, the winners receive a cash award, so the library could have explored this area with the students as well.) One future possibility would be for the library to purchase resources for students/entrepreneurs with the agreement that the students will reimburse the library for these purchases when their businesses get off the ground. However, the infrastructure to do this does not currently exist in the library, and because of the ambiguity of the line between pure academic projects and entrepreneurial efforts this arrangement may be difficult to implement.

In the end, the collection development librarian agreed to ask the vendors if they had an academic discount or would be willing to sell individual subsections of the reports for a lesser amount. In this case, however, neither firm was willing to sell a subsection of its report to the library, and just one of the firms was willing to sell its report at an academic discount. After conferring with the library director, the collection development librarian established a budget of one thousand dollars for the students’ request; this eliminated all but one subsection of a report. This budget figure and the responses from the vendors were conveyed to the students.

The students wrote back and said that the thousand dollar figure worked perfectly for them and that they had, in fact, negotiated with one of the vendors to sell them one of the previously unaffordable report sections for $1,000 in exchange for some of their own research data! This is yet another example of the Internet “disintermediating” librarians from their traditional lines of work. It is also an ex-