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Little Red Herrings: The Coming Bubble Bust

Mark Y. Herring

Winthrop University, herringm@winthrop.edu

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Little Red Herrings — The Coming Bubble Bust?



by **Mark Y. Herring** (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University) <herringm@winthrop.edu>

Amid all the high dudgeon about news from various corners of the earth, leave it to academics to ignore what is really important: the cost of getting a college education. We all know that the price tag on even a modest college education (not one of the premiere Ivy League institutions) is through the roof. What used to cost under \$10,000 for four years of college (that tells you how old I am) is hardly enough to get through *one* semester. Moreover, getting a degree in four years proves something of a miracle. It is more likely to be five or six, and often through no fault of the student but the fault of some institution for not sequencing the classes appropriately.

Given the brouhaha about parsimonious adjunct faculty pay that one hears about routinely (the schedule adjunct walk-out is tapped for February 2015), you'd think that getting a college degree is relatively inexpensive. And, of course, you'd be wrong. Adjunct pay is the black eye of academe, *one* of its dirty little secrets that is no longer that secret. The state of that abysmal pay is somewhat ironic when you think about all the tweed-coated know-it-alls who weigh in on minimum wage in the private sector. Yet in their own backyard are those who cannot even afford the *Affordable Care Act* (another irony that I won't go into). Apparently everyone at **McDonald's** should be making \$15 or more an hour, but that adjunct who teaches five sections of English 101 should not be making more than about \$5.50 an hour. But I digress.

The cost of going to college is now completely out of hand, or rather completely out of pocket. Student debt is now at \$1.1 *trillion*, a matter that won't hit home like other economic bubbles because those who have to pay that back won't realize its impact for a number of years. But let's not kid ourselves: these are unsustainable dollars that are certain to sink the enterprise of getting a college education. Perhaps academics are looking the other way because of the early failure of MOOCs and the fiasco of many for-profits. We in the academy have decided that there really aren't any threats, so it's business as usual. That's the kind of attitude that will hasten our demise.

One reason for the rising costs are the near-palatial amenities that colleges and universities think they must have. I'm talking about smart classrooms, gyms that are Hollywood-esque, dining halls that rival five-star restaurants, and all the rest. (For more, see: <http://onforb.es/1BPqggK> and <http://bit.ly/1rWPD1I>). Some schools have lounging pools, other gigantic Jacuzzis, recreation centers fit for kings and queens, and very nice residence halls (for more see <http://bit.ly/1jdy8Er>). It doesn't help, either, the college or university here or there that buys a \$220,000 table, or chair or whatever. All of these add to the cost of colleges.

Another reason for the cost of college tuition going up is the skyrocketing cost of administrator pay. Yes, I am an administrator, so I share part of that blame. According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, over 80 presidents at public institutions make more than a half million annually (<http://bit.ly/1rWPD1I>). More than 90 of them make more than **President Obama**. This is just presidents; the list of vice-presidents, provosts, and deans swells

those numbers considerably. I understand the argument that one must pay top-flight dollars to get top-flight administrator-CEOs, but the millions that are paid to some surely are excessive.

Of course, these dollars pale in comparison to what is being paid to coaches of football, basketball, and other sports. Today, we're not counting the number of head football coaches who make more than a million annually, but counting the number of *assistant* coaches who make more than a million annually. Over 70 football coaches make one million annually (at least, that's the salary); the number swells to more than 100 making half-a-million or more. The we-try-harder basketball coaches have a meagre 35 who are making a million or more annually, some of them at schools that are also paying football coaches a million or more. The news this week is that the **University of Florida** paid about \$7 million just to get the coach of its choosing. Some will argue that supporters pay a lot of these costs and that is in part true. But it's also true that this drives up the cost of everything else one way or another.

Finally, in order to get everyone mad at me, let me add that libraries — the financial black holes of every institution — also contribute to these costs. In the grand scheme of things, we are behind a lot of other people and things in this very, very long line of ex-

orbitant costs, but we are still in that line and we cannot deny it. We have databases that cost four, five, and six figures, depending on the size of the institution, journals that cost four or five figures, and updates, refurbishments, and new buildings that cost millions and tens of millions.

Now add to this that it turns out we're not, as a group (I mean academics) educating young people fully prepared to go out into the world. Some graduate unable to read or write proficiently. Some graduate not knowing much of anything about their majors. Some graduate with hangovers and a good deal of debt. To worsen matters, we academics are quick to point out that these kinds of empirical measures are unfair, don't get at the heart of who and what we are, and do not "tell the whole story." I hyperbolize — a little — but you get the point.

So what are we doing about any of this? Sadly, not much. We academics bellyache about not being paid enough, whine about legislatures, opine over how no one understands how much good we do, how hard we work, how hard this job is, and so on. None of these things change the fact that it costs far too much to get a college education.

We are going to have to do a great deal more. We need to own up to some of these deficiencies and then work harder at trying to

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completing tasks, different courier models, and different methods for material handling can be loads of fun but challenging. **Bacon** keeps a list of lessons learned in the process, which include:

- Keep it Simple (but not too simple)
- Better understand staff workflow at different sized libraries
- Expect to compromise and prepare your libraries for the inevitable
- Communicate frequently during your implementation phase
- Don't rush — remember those staff who need extra time to adapt
- Put a personal "face" to the partnership for your members
- And remember...it's all about the courier & workflow!

Both **Bacon** and **Machovec** couldn't be happier with the results. **Bacon** explains, "In the first seven weeks, we circulated almost 2,000 items (with little publicity)!"

It's clear that a resource sharing solution allows patrons to borrow and access research materials in an efficient and cost-effective way, but there is still some local collection development to be done. By tracking requesting, fulfillment, and circulation transactions, library staff has the opportunity to see patterns, which translate into actionable data for local collection development, too.

In talking with several libraries from the California-based LINK+, there was a sense that a real need exists for local libraries to leverage data about the composition and use of the collective collection for making collection management decisions. **Bob Kieft**, Director of **Occidental College Library** (a member of the consortium), explains, "I believe that groups of libraries should be building their collections centrally not locally...new reports help us in a number of ways to think collectively about our inventory and how best to manage that together." He explains it's valuable for retrospective analysis in terms of making deselection decisions, but also for selection decisions — especially in libraries that are still managing more of their acquisitions based on bibliographer review rather than through PDA/DDA programs. **Kieft** continues, "Some version of collective inventory management is the future of library print collections — and might be for electronic too."

That's where reporting plays a key role: libraries can now see, down to the individual item level, every item that's requested in the resource sharing system, including which libraries have borrowed what and from whom. For academic libraries, it's often not as much about the sheer number of materials but the quality of materials. As print usage declines, the materials that users need to continue to access in print are expensive and scarce, so access to a distributed collection across consortia becomes increasingly valuable. These reports show at the subject level or call number range — even at the individual title level — exactly what it is that researchers needed to borrow.

This data enables libraries to see the value of collections that they and their peers have

chosen to specialize in and to demonstrate for stakeholders how those unique materials are serving a broader audience. For example, the **MOBIUS/Prospector Peer-to-Peer** arrangement opens the door for users from **Missouri University** libraries to access the **Colorado Health Sciences Library** collections as easily as their own local collections. Additionally, the reports expose opportunities to streamline access to less unique titles (e.g., purchasing an electronic copy of something that was requested multiple times from a cooperating institution). Integration with user type categories means libraries can leverage information regarding the types of users making repeated requests (i.e., students or faculty) to support collection decisions.

Finally, the structure of the union database enables individual libraries to record institutional selection and deselection decisions locally and expose them via systems like **INN-Reach** for all participating members of the consortia to see. This visibility supports workflows for consortial review prior to permanent withdrawal and offers a common system for libraries to identify and confirm availability of last copies across the consortia. This type of infrastructure and reporting mechanisms are needed to support ongoing collaborative deselection and retention decision-making. Building it into the resource sharing system ensures efficient processes for users to access those last shared copies and contributes to the likelihood of success across initiatives.

Tools like the shared system and access to shared data are incredibly powerful for libraries to mine data for the purpose of driving appropriate actions. What's even better is what systems like **INN-Reach** can support going forward. **Tim Auger**, Director of Resource Sharing at **Innovative**, explains, "In the future, both transaction and selection/deselection data will be automatically analyzed for real-time decision-making, and that's where it gets really exciting." 🐟

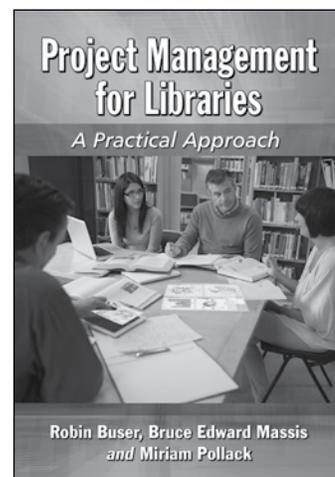
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make improvements. Early MOOCs may have failed, but something, some other platform, is going to sweep in one day and replace the whole enterprise if we do not. I'm no scryer, but I think it's safe to say that we really cannot go on like this much longer, at least not without addressing more seriously some of these important issues.

But we are going to have to do it much faster than we usually do. We academics are very good at talking, not so much when it comes to doing. We like to talk problems to death, but this one isn't going to die. Yes, there is much in academe to commend itself, but that good is fast being overtaken by some of the bad I've mentioned here. I have no magic wand to wave to make these problems disappear. We're just going to have to roll up our sleeves and address these serious problems.

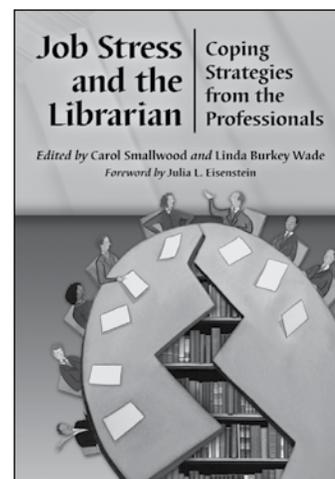
I know if we don't, others will — they are already — and they will be sure not to include us, whom they consider the heart of the problem. 🐟

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