Against the Grain

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It's High Time — The Efficiency Expert

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Column Editor's Note: *It's high time we more fully consider the future of academic libraries. Increasingly, the hectic pace of our individual institutions, accelerated by the new normal of "doing more with less," has led us to focus more as a profession on the short term. Libraries have thus far done a good job of steering between the potholes, but often at the expense of seeing what's coming farther down the road.*

"It's High Time," this column, will focus on especially the longer horizon contexts of our field, and offer big ideas and questions relevant to our missions, strategies, and "that vision thing." I intend to be frank, provocative, and evocative. I plan to pose many questions here that we all need to consider, and share my thoughts that, rather than set in stone, are constantly iterative. Furthermore, I will not be addressing the purpose of this column if I'm not occasionally sharing at least a few ideas that prove half-baked or fail to survive deeper exploration.

*This column, and the discussions I hope it will engender, will crossover with other nodes of future thinking in libraries, including **Against the Grain's** own new **ATG Trendspotting** initiative, (<https://www.charlestonlibraryconference.com/announcing-the-new-atg-trendspotting-initiative/>). Our conversations will be the richer for their connectedness. I encourage you to communicate with me via Twitter (@Darby_Librarian), email <dcorcutt@ncsu.edu>, or wherever we might cross paths in person. — DO*

A lot of the economic news and predictions around higher education are grim. Clayton Christensen, the Harvard Business School faculty famous for his theory of "disruptive innovation," predicts the closure of up to half of American colleges and universities within 10-15 years, due largely to the rise and inevitably uneven fruits of online education programs, (<https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/article/2017/04/28/clay-christensen-sticks-predictions-massive-college-closures>). The Chronicle of Higher Education has already begun documenting this trend, (<https://www.chronicle.com/article/As-a-University-Is-Sold-in/243944>).

Moody's recently reported on the particularly bleak financial outlook for Kentucky universities, noting the same perfect storm of lessening enrollments and rising costs that many other states are or soon will be facing, (<https://www.kentucky.com/news/politics-government/article213801469.html>). For The University of California, rising enrollments and declining state funding are precipitating an impending crisis, (https://cshe.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/publications/douglassbleemer.tipping_point_report.august_20_2018_0.pdf). Public or private, even campuses that

weather the coming hard times will likely do so in part by dramatically reducing library budgets, and perhaps even consolidating or outsourcing many library services.

We have entered an age of the efficiency expert. Library processes, by budgetary necessity, continue being streamlined, automated, and passed from professional to paraprofessional staff. Collection decisions are offloaded to our users through demand driven acquisition (DDA), evidence-based selection (EBS), and similar programs. Bookstacks are reduced to make room for new uses, often even becoming "non-library" spaces for classrooms, student services, or meeting rooms. It is not uncommon for institutional administrators hiring new library directors to value incumbents who might best "get the librarians on board" with space, fiscal, cultural, and/or staffing changes. And yet, all of the above changes described in this paragraph could be carried out well and constitute very positive steps forward.

Of course, on the other hand, they can all be carried out poorly. Sub-processes could be over-automated, paraprofessionals over-taxed, and the abilities and knowledge of librarian professionals devalued. The powerful tools of user-driven selection cannot fly on autopilot perpetually. Bookstacks changes can alienate users, and new uses of spaces not overtly linked to core mission can give the library the feel of a patchwork bazaar. Finally, directors primarily focused on efficiencies in the sense of cost avoidance can pose genuine threats to librarians' tenure or faculty status, the functionality of the internal team, the library's future opportunities to truly collaborate with campus partners, and the library's ability to adapt to new needs and opportunities.

Faithfully executing the role of library as efficiency expert requires embracing the larger meaning of the term: re-envisioning the library's mission not just for the present, but for emerging and probable future contexts. For the present and foreseeable future, reducing expenditures does seem to serve these contexts, but not just as an end in itself (coping with reduced funding and buying power), but also as a means to allow the library to be proactive in re-deploying some of its financial resources to new areas. The logic applies to the time and attention resources of library staff as well. What work can we automate, streamline, consolidate, reduce, or eliminate in order to re-deploy our staff to more relevant and emerging needs of the larger institution?

We see these questions being asked, for example, in conversations around new roles for library liaisons, the shift in focus from "cataloging" to "discovery," and consideration of library support throughout the fuller life cycle of research. Yet, I often wonder if we are thinking holistically enough about such issues. Not only

do we often only talk about these problems and opportunities simply within particular library units or professional subfields, but even when we have these conversations as an institution, libraries generally think at the library level rather than that of the larger institution. Our imaginations become quickly limited by questions like "Is that an appropriate role for the library to take on campus?" — a key question, to be sure, but one that stifles creativity and collaboration when posed early on.

Every academic library needs to have a strong vision for how it will provide excellent value for its campus, both now and on into the longer-term future. But we must also remember, as collections librarians are especially fond of reminding our vendors when it comes to large package deals nowadays: it's often not about value, but simply about price. As strong citizens of our larger institutions, we need to be thinking not just in terms of how we can provide value for our campuses, but rather what role the library can take in helping the college or university control costs and especially provide value to its users and funders.

Libraries and librarians are generally and perhaps nearly uniquely positioned at the hub of research and teaching across all disciplines, as well as at many points of intersection with community support services (e.g., information technology, student affairs). Our vantage point, if we take advantage of it, allows us to observe and speak to not just improving the processes and mission of the library, but of our campus as a whole.

We might have extremely strong insight into needs that align with, but may be outside the scope of, what the libraries should provide, either at all or at least without tremendous discussion and collaboration with other campus units. For example: What gaps (by sizes, formats) do researchers encounter with regard to dataset storage and dissemination? What vital technology literacy skills do students seem to be lacking? Which campus services do instructors and learners have difficulty discovering? How should research outputs be considered by administrators in assessing faculty and programs? (Libraries understandably shy away from taking any perceived role in faculty evaluation, despite the fact that they can — and should — provide their particular expertise in the evaluation and contextualization of many of the data sources used in such evaluation.)

In other words, we can be highly effective efficiency experts for our larger institutions, even if the library's hands-on role ends at communicating a particular observed need. Especially in these and the times on the horizon, a rising tide lifts all boats. Libraries that can embrace a fuller role of efficiency expert for themselves and their campuses will add both real and perceived value to their services. 🐙