Academic Libraries In The Digital Age: Best Practices For Modernizing The Library

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the practical changes to the library field that continue to take place as technology advances. These changes include changes to physical space, collection development, and librarian workflows. It will also include best practices to modernize the academic library to best complement a technologically driven university.

Keywords:

INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that the digital age has changed the way libraries operate. In the case of the academic library, modernizing the collection and the space in which the library operates has been a constant chase to keep up with the changing goals and roles of the university. As the university strives to provide the most technologically advanced classes and degrees to its students, the academic library has been faced with a variety of challenges to its usefulness and relevance.

In order to meet these challenges, the library has had to change. The first change to happen to the academic library was a change in the way collections were curated and developed. Though paper volumes are still the bulk of the library's collection, they are no longer the bulk of their spending, with alternative formats winning out over the print materials. Following that change was a change in librarian workflows. With the new technology, the processing and acquisition of new materials changed, but the changes did not stop there. Public services librarians found that they were answering new and more complex questions, stemming from the new resources and new academic departments on campus. Even special collections librarians found their roles changing, as people clamored to be able to access more materials - even those that were rare and fragile - virtually. All of these changes led to a physical transformation of the library that would allow library faculty and staff to better serve their patron population and to make access to and use of all of their materials easier.

BACKGROUND

The impact of the digital age in the academic library started much sooner than it did for the general public. Typically on the cutting edge of technological advancements due to grant research, universities employed new technologies at a rapid rate very early in the process, but it was not until the 1980s that research began to grow at an exponential rate. As Foltz, et. al point out, this growth in technological advancements at the university level was a direct result of the Bayh-Dole Act, which increased the university's capacity for patent activity (2012). This put pressure on the academic library to advance their technological use over their public counterparts. One of the first technological advances to hit the academic library was the computerized card catalog. This allowed libraries to rapidly add items to their collection, and allowed their patrons to find materials quickly. This also dramatically impacted the technical services aspect of the academic library, as the digitization of MARC records, first used in the 1960s, was instrumental in making the digital catalog a success (Arms, 2012).

The second large step in technology in academic libraries was the advent of electronic resources. Twenty years ago, electronic resources were just beginning, and print resources reigned supreme (Burrows, 2006). What began as some articles, and then later whole journals, being put up on the internet to be accessed by computer quickly snowballed into databases, and then later database aggregators. This new format of materials changed the way money was allocated in acquisitions, and disrupted the flow of reference assistance in public services. As more students were able to access the materials that they needed from the comfort of their homes and dorm rooms, academic libraries had to come up with a variety of ways to entice their students into their libraries.

ACADEMIC LIBRARIES IN THE DIGITAL AGE

While concerned about dwindling patron counts and worried about how they would justify their budgets, academic libraries in the digital age knew that they could not ignore digital materials. Studies by the ACRL show that academic libraries are facing ever-increasing budget cuts, and the prospects for reference desk staffing continue to decrease (Dubnjakovic, 2012), but libraries must continue to give their patrons what they want. The rise of the e-reader in its various forms (Nook, Kindle, and Kobo, just to name a few) was an opportunity that the university library could not afford to pass up. While there is mixed data on the usefulness of the e-reader for some disciplines (most notably medical and art disciplines), there are other disciplines that benefit greatly from the e-reader. It has been noted that it is much more convenient to have all ones' books at their fingertips via e-reader (Zimerman, 2011). No longer do English students have to carry around and keep track of dozens of texts for each of their classes. The same can be said for history and other reading-intensive disciplines. Electronic resources are also ideal for science disciplines which are constantly changing, though these disciplines tend to be more focused on articles accessed by computer, rather than textbooks on e-readers. Moving the e-reader technologies to other platforms (such as tablets, cell-phones, and computers) has also greatly increased their usefulness (Zimerman, 2011).

Because of this, electronic resources became a large part of the library budget. This knee-jerk effort, however, left library budgets a mess and led to even more possible headaches regarding copyright and accessibility. The newest trends in libraries are toward a more thoughtful collection, even when it comes to e-resources. Now, though, rather than being concerned about space, as libraries typically are when it comes to physical resources, they are more concerned about cost and duplication of materials. It is not atypical for a popular journal to be part of several databases - making it appear that the library is paying for the same material over and over again. However, careful negotiation with database aggregators can ameliorate the effect that this phenomenon has on the collection. Also important is careful examination of the use statistics of the various databases. A cost-benefit analysis should be performed periodically to make sure that they electronic resources available are worth what they cost.

All of this careful curating of the library collection is useless if the students do not come to the library to use it. Rather than relying on the idea that the library was necessary to students education, academic libraries have gone on the offensive, with lengthy and sometimes expensive marketing campaigns to let students know about the resources that the library has to offer. Some marketing tools have been traditional - flyers, pamphlets, and rack cards - while others have been more outside the box. In order to celebrate the opening of a new information commons in their library, for example, Old Dominion University mocked up the new space in a popular computer game, allowing their students to see what was happening to the space before it was even open (Old Dominion University Libraries, 2013).

Other marketing tools for libraries include the library website, a standard feature of every academic library. From the library website, academic librarians can link their students to Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and a host of other social network and media sharing sites to keep them abreast of what the library is doing and can do for them. In today's libraries, marketing is just another facet of outreach, which is a core component of library service.

In seeking to perform more outreach for their patrons, it is important to get the librarian out of the library. Anecdotal evidence supports the idea that students are more likely to seek out help if they know someone who works at the library, and "knowing" a librarian is as simple as having interacted with him or her during a class. Technology has made this easier; now, library instruction sessions no longer need to be confined to within the walls of the library; with most of the resources students want online, an instruction session can consist entirely of teaching the use of popular databases (Thull and Hansen, 2009). To make a more well-rounded experience, virtual tours of the library using footage conveniently housed either on the library's website or popular video sites can show students how to navigate the library before they ever set foot in it. More importantly, because these resources and more are available on the library's website, the learning experience does not have to end when the librarian leaves the room.

All of this has led to a change in the physical space of the library. Some of the change has come from necessity, as students expect more technology, but some of it has come from ability, as digital collections replace physical ones and more space becomes available in the library. The crowning achievement in the transformation of the library from analog to digital has been the information commons. Though the digital revolution may have started elsewhere on campus due to the introduction of computer labs in whatever buildings or spaces were available, the information commons can be more than just a computer lab in a library. It becomes something more than the sum of its parts by melding the technology that students expect with the knowledge and information resources that they need to complete their assignments.

By placing computers and other technology, such as collaborative work stations and maker spaces in the library, the library can regain its status as a place where knowledge is put to use. However, instead of just slaving over term papers until the wee hours of the morning, students can use the information commons to do all their work.

What seems to shock both students and faculty alike about these places is that they break the stereotype of the quiet library. While it is likely and even advisable that some areas of the library should remain quiet, contemplative areas for individual study, the information commons is the antithesis of the idea; it is all about the exchange of ideas, and the exchange of ideas is a noisy prospect. However, this can answer an old conundrum for the library: by making these spaces where noise is okay, they can ameliorate the effects of high traffic areas, by allowing the high traffic noise to just become one with the rest of the noise.

A perfect example of this has been what we have done at the main campus of Western Kentucky University. In the fall of 2012, renovation began on the entrance floor of Cravens Library. Because of how our campus sits, the entrance floor is actually the fourth floor of the building, and sees heavy traffic, especially when weather conditions are bad - heat, cold, or precipitation, there are more bodies coming through the fourth floor of the Cravens library and its sister building, Helm. The fourth floor of the building has traditionally housed circulation because it was an entrance/exit floor, and not much else. The reference area for the library complex was in the building next door, which was attached by a breezeway on the fourth and fifth floors of Cravens - floors one and two of Helm. After construction, the circulation area remained in place on the fourth floor of Cravens, but was joined by thirty computers, several collaboration stations, and a new service point desk that had reference services, technological assistance from the campus IT department, and writing services provided by the English department.

In the eleven months that the newly christened Commons at Cravens has been opened, all three of the departments represented at the service point have seen more use, and the computer lab is packed with people, though there are computer labs available elsewhere in the building. The addition of the Commons at Cravens has also changed the patron flow of the building; the entrance which houses the Commons has seen an increase in patron count compared to the second building entrance, which was typically more popular due to the presence of a coffee shop.

All of the changes that are being made to the library are in the best interests of the patron, but can be daunting for the library personnel. They require a certain leap of faith - changing how effectiveness of the library and the librarian is measured. However, these changes are necessary if libraries are going to remain relevant to the university.

FURTHER IMPLICATIONS

The digital age has been one fraught with complications, but it has not stopped the academic library from continuing to provide the best service it can to students, faculty, and staff alike. As the pace of electronic publishing continues to grow, more of the librarian's time will be taken up with managing these resources. Future research should focus on comparing the usage of electronic resources to print resources across the disciplines, to ensure that the solutions being proposed do not adversely affect disciplines still interested in print collections. There will not be a one-size-fits-all solution to this new challenge, but many smaller solutions that come together to make a cohesive answer to the digital age.

CONCLUSIONS

As academic libraries move forward and embrace the digital age, we must remember that it is not necessary to abandon materials. In fact, we should be turning a thoughtful eye on how we develop our electronic collections, treating them as carefully as we have our print collections. Though our parameters for accepting or rejecting new electronic materials may be different from the ones we use for print, they are no less important. Maintaining a balance in the collection is the key to juggling our responsibilities with the realities of the budget. To build up usage of these materials, librarians should be focusing on marketing not only the materials that the library has collected, but the physical space and their own expertise. Only then will students and faculty see the value in what academic libraries have to offer.

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