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The Future Role of the Academic Librarians in Higher Education

Verónica Reyes

abstract: Higher education programs across the nation have recognized that transformation in pedagogical norms is critical. Often, decreased funding for education is cited as a primary driver for the need to transform the way higher education does its business. This article describes a series of factors that confirm that the decrease in funding is only one element that is forcing the changes that librarians have long predicted would be necessary. The convergence of external economic pressures and changing student expectations demands a need for altering how we deliver instruction. This provides a window of opportunity for academic librarians to take a leadership role in our institutions for leveraging opportunities to reach students during significant learning moments outside of the classroom.

Higher education programs across the nation have acknowledged that transformation in pedagogical norms is critical. The Project for the Future of Higher Education, The Center for Academic Transformation, the OCLC 2003 Environmental Scan, and the National Higher Education Information and Communication Technology Initiative are among the programs or initiatives that recognize and call for an overhaul of the way in which we currently use and think about technology in support of education. Often, decreases in funding for education are cited as a primary driver for the need to transform the way higher education does its business, and the resulting changes are often reductions in essential services. The lack of funding, however, is only one element in the transformation of higher education today that librarians have long predicted would be necessary. In the early stages of the 1990s electronic/technological revolution, librarians acknowledged that the role of instruction librarians would be seriously affected. Teaching the mechanics of the information technologies was transformed into the teaching of critical thinking skills that are vital in conducting sound research, such as the selection and evaluation of appropriate sources. Within the research environment, the classic role of librarians as intermediaries was affected as the users’ desire
for self-sufficiency increased and better, more seamless systems were developed. The newly connected students expected the information necessary for learning and research to be available when it was needed, regardless of time and location. Other changes in demographics, including the increase in racial and cultural diversity and the increased number of returning and non-traditional students, required that content be packaged to suit many different learning styles.

These changes have created an environment in which librarians can partner with faculty to create content to support students’ development of information literacy skills. Instruction librarians have been building pedagogical expertise and establishing relationships with faculty and units on campus in order to provide the necessary leadership to transform the delivery of content in ways that support the many changing needs of students. This article offers further examples and suggestions for how librarians can leverage their educational role on campus in order to remain central to today’s and future students’ education, despite the pressures created by funding reductions.

Decreased Funding for Education

There is no doubt that the funding of higher education continues to be a serious problem. Nationally, appropriations of state tax funds for operating expenses of higher education per $1,000 of personal income have fallen from a high of $10.56 in the late 1970s to a low of $7.35 for 2003. Since 1992, appropriations have remained relatively stable, varying from $7.86 to the current $7.35 low. The recent economic recession has exacerbated the funding problem, and several long-term drivers mean a probability of continued stagnation or loss. An increasing percentage of the federal budget is going to fund entitlements (social security and Medicaid), defense (military and homeland security), and debt repayment. This results in a smaller percentage available for infrastructure, social programs (including education), and research. In addition, the federal government has shifted costs for some programs to the states without corresponding funding (unfunded mandates).

State funding of public universities represents an increasingly smaller proportion of the universities’ budgets. This is related to a general lack of support for increased taxes at the federal and state levels as well as increased costs for other public services such as welfare, health care, prisons, K–12 expenditures, and police. To help fill the gap, universities now rely on increased tuition, grant and contracts funding, and private/corporate sources. For instance, at the University of Arizona, state appropriations make up only a little over 25 percent of the budget in 2004, down from approximately 36 percent in 1997. Total external awards have increased from approximately $300 million to $500 million in 2004. These shifts in funding sources are likely to have subtle yet profound effects on behaviors and the management in public universities. Whereas decreased state funding certainly encourages the changes that are now necessary in the delivery of instruction, there are other factors that are driving change, such as an increase in student enrollment and a higher number of non-traditional students, resulting in a student body with very different needs and expectations. These factors demand drastic changes in how we support research and learning.
Changes in Demographics and Student Expectations

Recent studies suggest some changes in the characteristics of new undergraduates. Undergraduates expect communication and access to information to be tightly integrated and ever present. The boundaries between work, play, and study are blurred. Connectivity has fundamentally changed the way people work, think, and interact with others. Computers are not viewed as a new technology but rather an integral part of daily life along with cars and phones. Connectivity and multitasking are a way of life.

There is a fundamental shift in how people conceptualize information, communication, and connectivity. The Internet and its search engines have created expectations that digital content is seamless and accessible. Students anticipate all searches to directly connect them to relevant content. The historic library organization of bound indexes and card catalogs that necessitated a two-step process is no longer recognized by many of our customers. When it is recognized, it is often not preferred.

Students want to be self-sufficient and have unmediated, immediate access to information. The very changes in our information technologies have changed this information seeking behavior, giving the control that once belonged to libraries over to the users. Evidence suggests, however, that students may not have the competency to be as self-sufficient as they would like. Undergraduate students demonstrate some technology literacy in the software applications they use but not necessarily broad technological fluency. That is, they understand how to use technology to meet a particular need, but their understanding of the technical capabilities generally stops there. Undergraduates’ use of technology, including the Web, is primarily transactional for communication—e-mail, IM (instant messaging), or blogs. They want such communication in many modes at any time. Though libraries have introduced electronic reference services using e-mail and chat and learning objects to introduce basic information literacy skills, they have not yet exploited the full potential represented by the changes in student communication patterns.

There has been a great emphasis on developing learning objects, in particular. Because it is an emerging method for instructional support, however, there is a vague understanding of what a learning object is. At the University of Arizona, the following definition seems to be the most broadly understood and adopted, “Learning Objects are defined...as...entiti[ies], digital or non-digital, which can be used, re-used or referenced during technology supported learning.” This definition is used by the Learning Technology Standards Committee of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE), http://ieeeltsc.org/wg12LOM/lomDescription. A similar definition is used by the National Learning Infrastructure Initiative, Learning Objects Working Group, http://people.cohums.ohio-state.edu/dagefoerde2/NLII_LO/definitions.htm. Although the definition and products will vary as the field matures, MERLOT, http://www.merlot.org/Home.po, and MIT’s OpenCourseWare Project, http://ocw.mit.edu/index.html, have been touted as exemplary forms of learning object repositories.

There is evidence that suggests that these changes in communication patterns are not merely preferences but have very real connections with learning outcomes. Student engagement inside and outside the classroom has been found to contribute to achievement, retention, and increased graduation rates. According to the National Survey of
Student Engagement, national benchmarks of effective educational practice are the “level of academic challenge; active and collaborative learning; student-faculty interaction; enriching educational experiences; and supportive campus environments.” Students expect to connect and be actively engaged with others throughout the learning process. Instruction librarians need to rethink how instruction sessions are designed in order to provide opportunities for engagement and collaboration outside of the classroom. Joan Lippincott, associate executive director of the Coalition for Networked Information asserts, “Since much of the learning in higher education institutions takes place outside of the classroom, libraries can be an important venue for such learning.”

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As instruction librarians, we often think of our role in education as limited to either the instruction session or the reference transaction. We have an opportunity, however, to provide spaces for students to engage and interact with the learning process through our libraries, both physically and virtually. We need to think creatively about reaching students beyond the confines of formal interactions and meet students where and how they communicate and learn best.

These aforementioned factors have a tremendous impact on how instruction librarians teach information literacy skills and demand a more sophisticated approach to the delivery of instruction. These factors also change what we need to teach. It is no longer sufficient to teach the mechanics of a single database. We can now move on to make correlations between keyword searching and rhetorical analysis in order to illustrate the use of language in scholarship. At the University of Arizona, librarians work with the English composition foundation course in order to introduce basic information literacy skills. Librarians initiated the concept of making these correlations to the writing program coordinators and instructors. As a result of this collaboration, librarians have conducted training for the instructors and have made the research unit more seamless by connecting the research process with their rhetorical analysis unit. For instance, UA librarians working with the writing program’s foundation course have had success in having first-time composition instructors teach the students to distinguish between scholarly and popular resources as they have discussions about audience types in the rhetorical analysis unit. As a result of this collaboration, important information literacy skills are truly integrated into the curriculum. In this way, the librarians led and asserted their role in a significant part of the students’ education through a consulting role for our campus educators.

Changes in Learning Environments and Expectations

There is also an increased emphasis on collaboration in learning within higher education. Of particular interest, given the projected increases in enrollment, is preliminary evidence suggesting that collaborative approaches to learning increase academic achievement. Libraries have engaged in building spaces designed to enhance group learning,
otherwise known as the information commons (IC). In addition to providing readily accessible online resources for conducting research, computers include productivity software ranging from PowerPoint to film editing software. The space allows students to collaboratively conduct research as they finalize project and presentation material in a place where most of their needs during this endeavor can be answered by trained staff and/or professionals at any point in the process. Other features of the IC generally include classrooms for library instruction, collaborative workstations, group study spaces, and readily available help for any of the students’ tasks. The development of these technology-rich spaces demands a broader and more sophisticated approach to the delivery of instruction. Deep technological changes accompanied with new pedagogical approaches to support learning at the point of need must be developed in order to engage students in their learning process. Librarians can take advantage of students’ connectivity if we are willing to go where they are, without being physically present. In addition, if we can be present in spaces where they are, we can assist students’ growth right at that critical point in their learning, at the point of need. The Coalition for Networked Information IMS Global Learning Consortium (CNI/IMS) has recognized that, as the national education technology infrastructures are being developed, libraries are not playing the role that they can; and, yet, on many campuses, libraries hold central real estate for the support of research, teaching, and student learning and need to take better advantage of this position.

Leveraging Learning Spaces/Teaching Spaces

At the national level, there are many ongoing efforts to improve both the quality and cost effectiveness of learning for undergraduates. Experimentation has occurred in the areas of blended learning to respond to the need for reducing cost and to attempt to more effectively respond to students’ various learning styles. Innovations in educational technology facilitate approaches such as problem-based learning, self-directed learning, and collaborative learning. These developments have placed more intermediaries between faculty and students, as more technical professionals are needed to deliver an educational experience. “These innovations ‘unbundled’ the faculty role; that is, separate[d] the content from delivery.” This environment provides another area in which instruction librarians have ample opportunity to insert themselves in the students’ education.

Learning to utilize technology in support of pedagogy will take time and culture change. Currently, most technology has been used to automate the administrative tasks of teaching, such as posting course syllabi, readings, grades, announcements, and in some cases posting quizzes as well as providing a space for discussion. This environment provides faculty and students more effective means for communication and sharing of resources. Despite successful adoption of course management systems in many institutions (mostly WebCT, Blackboard, and most recently Desire2Learn) and
substantial support for e-learning technology and innovation across higher education via the Program in Course Redesign conducted by the Center for Academic Transformation, the expected potential for innovation of e-learning will continue to be unrealized unless a major paradigm shift occurs in the way faculty teach and in the way universities provide e-learning support.

Role of Libraries

Although other units on campus generally have a formal institutional responsibility for providing the primary courseware tools, libraries have an important role in providing and organizing library-created instructional content. We must work with these campus units to ensure seamless access to library instructional content from campus course management software or at any other point where the content would provide value.

We need to carefully assess how we can best support the changing needs of the university community to improve the quality of education. The library will need to understand the changing needs and expectations of the campus community and design and implement systems and services that facilitate learning outside of the classroom. It is difficult to imagine the opportunities technology will provide even two years from now, but instruction librarians must consider the many ways in which they can take advantage of the modes in which students communicate now in order to better reach them.

We cannot reach a majority of students using the current method of providing in-class instruction, and we do not have the resources to expand this endeavor. Efforts have been made to focus the instruction where we can reach the most number of students at the most appropriate time in the curriculum through scalable models. At the University of Arizona Library, following the ACRL’s Guidelines for Instruction Programs in Academic Libraries, our instruction efforts have been directed toward the core courses in the majors, the foundation courses, and the general education curriculum. Librarians have partnered with various academic units such as the general education curriculum committee, various English major curriculum committees, the theatre arts major curriculum committee, the English composition program coordinators, the Learning Technology Center, the outcomes assessment coordinators, among other units, in order to better integrate information literacy across campus. Although there is still a long way to go, these units have responded with enthusiasm and now see librarians as partners in the education of the students. For instance, as a result of one of these partnerships, the general education curriculum now recognizes and requires information literacy learning outcomes. The library is currently working toward scalable methods of delivery for both the general education and foundation courses; some of these efforts will still require face-to-face interaction with a librarian. However, there are many students and faculty with whom
we do not directly interact. Our libraries should, therefore, be developing interfaces that enable these student and faculty to get the information they need with the least amount of mediation. It is important to assess these initiatives, and this will become even more important as we move toward more virtual education environments.

Conclusion

We must reconsider the traditional library learning spaces and leverage all other resources for which we are given stewardship. Librarians must cease using classroom instruction as the primary means of building information competencies in students. Rather, they must become consultants to teaching faculty and graduate students, encouraging and helping them to incorporate research/information literacy skills into their class curricula. Librarians should continue to evaluate and build on models that successfully accomplish this by working with individual and groups of instructors and students in a systematic way.

We must consider our virtual environments as ready-access learning spaces where we may reach students at the point of need. We will neither be able to nor have we ever been able to touch each and every student on campus. Opportunities for learning need to be ever-present wherever the students are. To support this effort, countless learning objects are being developed in many academic libraries, in order to teach one piece or a whole of what was normally taught in a classroom or in meeting rooms. At this point, however, we are still largely creating learning objects that are discreet when, in actuality, we need for them to be integrated such as are our current in-class instruction efforts.

Success in utilizing the virtual learning spaces we have available will require several layers of infrastructure, including the development of modules that can be reused in different contexts and the organization of learning objects so that they can be accessed and used inside and outside the course management environment. Libraries must invest in the infrastructure (systems, expertise, and processes) to support the development of reusable instructional content. This will take a coordinated effort within libraries and collaboration with campus partners. As we invest in the above-mentioned infrastructure, instruction librarians will need to continue to encourage faculty to teach information literacy skills throughout their courses. At the University of Arizona, librarians have worked with the English composition instructors to incorporate certain information literacy skills as part of their various units during the course of the semester. We are also currently partnering with our campus computing unit to enhance library created learning objects so that they may be better integrated into course management systems. We will also need to rethink the design of our instruction sessions and how we think about content. In an online environment, the content we provide in an in-class instruction session loses its cohesiveness and neat packaging. Instead of providing instruction for a whole of a module, we might need to provide pieces of one inserted across the curriculum. As instruction librarians, we need to develop the competencies for instructional design and the use of instructional technology so that we may lead the way in new and innovative ways to support the education of our students.

Libraries are uniquely positioned to offer virtual and physical spaces that facilitate student engagement in self-directed learning. Librarians and staff should become active
in the planning of learning environments within library spaces. Our position in the world of information and learning enables us to create learning environments that support student acquisition, understanding, and application of information beyond the simple provision of application software and computing space. As instruction librarians, we must be willing to promote and share our expertise in this information age in support of our campus educational mission. If we expect to remain vital in our educational role, we—as librarians and partners in the education of our students—must be willing to leverage our real estate, whether virtual or physical, in ways that can have a great impact on student engagement and student learning.

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Notes


4. Ibid., 69.

5. Ibid.


7. Zumeta.


12. Dede; Oblinger; and Tapscott.