

Academic Librarians: Adding Value beyond the Library

BY HELPING MAKE COLLEGE MORE AFFORDABLE FOR STUDENTS AND HELPING FACULTY GAIN NEW INSIGHTS FROM HUMANISTIC RESEARCH, ACADEMIC LIBRARIANS CAN SHOWCASE THE SKILLS AND VALUE THEY PROVIDE.

BY PHIL FAUST

There has been a lot of media coverage lately about the state of higher education—that it's going to be the next “bubble” to burst, that it is ripe for disruption, that it's changing rapidly and yet not changing quickly enough. Amid all of this speculation, there are a few things with which most of us can agree—that universities are under pressure to lower the cost of education, better prepare students for jobs, produce better research, and increase enrollment.

Some universities haven't been able to withstand these pressures and have closed their doors. More are expected to follow suit, according to a 2015 report from Moody's Investor Service (2015) that predicts the closure rates of small colleges and universities will triple in the coming years, while mergers will double.

But the news for colleges and universities is not all bad. The challenges facing academic institutions also present opportunities for academic librarians to become more involved with campus initiatives and help support the central mission of their university.

Although academic *libraries* gener-

ally are viewed as centers of independent thought and learning, academic *librarians* increasingly are interested in understanding the key business drivers of their universities. As a result, academic librarians are becoming more involved in areas that tie directly to university goals and drivers—specifically, enhancing digital scholarship and affordability.

It Starts with Collaboration

Academic librarians bring many essential skills to university communities beyond cataloging and research, but making their expertise known to colleagues and administrators is among their biggest challenges. There are actual and perceived divides between academic librarians and faculty/administrators.

A study conducted by Gale and *Library Journal* magazine (Albers-Smith 2015) identified large gaps in communication and the perceived need for closer collaboration among librarians and faculty. The 2015 survey of roughly 500 faculty and 500 librarians revealed that roughly one-quarter of faculty think there is no need for campus librarians and faculty to consult with one another. Fewer than half of faculty (45 percent) want better communication with librarians, but nearly all librarians desire better communication with faculty.

This gap in librarian-faculty interest in cross-collaboration is exacerbated by the fact that about 20 percent of faculty are unaware of how the library can even support them. As one academic librarian noted, “Campus culture is that librarians are not ‘officially’ part of any one of the four colleges in the

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university.”

A similar perception gap was highlighted by a 2013 report, *The Evolving Value of Information Management*, published jointly by the Special Libraries Association and the *Financial Times*. The report identified five “essential attributes” of modern information professionals, one of which is understanding the drivers of the organization. One business executive interviewed for the report said, “The classic view of a knowledge manager is that they have insufficient knowledge on issues concerning clients and they are therefore not in the ball game.”

Overcoming this perception of “not [being] in the ball game” is critical if academic librarians are to become more involved with faculty and administrators. As it happens, there are emerging areas of scholarship that present opportunities to close the faculty-librarian gap.

Opportunities in the Digital Humanities

One of these emerging areas is digital humanities (DH), or digital scholarship, as it is often called. Digital scholarship is a growing area of focus on college and university campuses around the world.

It’s difficult to nail down a universally accepted definition of digital scholarship, but in the most general sense, it’s the use of technology to aid in humanistic inquiry. Other terms often used in conjunction with digital scholarship are data mining and textual analysis, which refer to the process by which text or datasets are “crawled” by software that recognizes entities, relationships, and actions and helps researchers draw new conclusions.

There is considerable debate surrounding digital scholarship in terms of exactly what it is and what the future holds for this growing area. Whether you are a champion or critic of digital scholarship, one thing you can’t deny is that it is attracting interest, both from university officials and leading organizations outside of higher education. With this interest have come

increased opportunities for research funds as well as recognition for schools. Universities need to remain competitive in the market for students, and winning prestigious grants is certainly one way to stand out.

There is also growth in digital scholarship instruction at many levels (including undergraduate and graduate students), and many forms of instruction are emerging, from stand-alone courses to graduate and doctoral programs. Some universities already have dedicated centers for digital scholarship education.

In late 2015, Gale partnered with *American Libraries* magazine on a survey of academic librarians and faculty to better understand how libraries are evolving to meet the increasing needs of digital scholarship. The survey results underscored that this is an area of opportunity for libraries—roughly nine out of ten faculty use digital humanities tools in their research or teaching, and almost all faculty said they think support of digital scholarship elevates the importance of academic libraries. The main reasons cited by faculty for this view included seeing the library as more of a digital center, renewing the library as a central place for research, and demonstrating the value of the skills of librarians (Eberhart 2016).

Partly in response to these findings, university libraries are increasingly taking on leadership roles organizing digital scholarship efforts on campuses. In fact, a quarter of the librarian respondents in Gale’s survey said their administration wants them to lead digital humanities in the future.

Academic Libraries Leading the Way

A number of librarians are doing amazing work both developing and leading digital scholarship initiatives, thereby raising their profile within their university community. One such librarian is Caroline Muglia, the head resource sharing and collection assessment librarian at the University of Southern California (USC).

“The library is the perfect place for

DH endeavors to be housed,” she says. “More and more libraries are being positioned as central drivers of digital humanities projects. I find this so important because we already have so many of the skills. At USC, we are already working with primary resources and interacting with vendors who are making their resources available to DH projects. We are already creating standards and getting our hands dirty in new tools and platforms, and [we] have the capacity to offer new services.”

Harriett Green, an English and digital humanities librarian and associate professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, seconds Muglia’s assessment. “As we have seen at Illinois and at our counterparts across North America and abroad, academic libraries have begun positioning themselves as key spaces for our users: integrated learning spaces and media commons, hubs for digitization, and multi-service research centers.”

Of course, there is still a long way to go and a lot to be learned, as Muglia explains.

“[At USC], we want to continue attracting DH projects that are flourishing around campus, but we first need to know our own capacity, skills, and ability to scale up,” she says. “We had a steep learning curve in terms of our own literacy on DH projects. Some librarians had deep familiarity with mapping tools or data mining platforms, but others did not. So we are in the process of educating all librarians on DH fluency, which is a baseline skill that all librarians should have.”

Centralizing DH activity is another key priority at USC, Muglia says. “[There are] pockets of digital humanities work being done, but it’s not institutionalized in terms of support, financial sustainability, or education,” she says. “The library is trying to position itself to take on that role. We aren’t there yet, but working with researchers on DH-related projects allows us to hone our own skills and to showcase to the university that the library has the capacity to support this kind of research.”

Librarians are also collaborating with

many different departments and audiences both inside the library and out, which is especially important in digital humanities, says Green.

“Collaborations can and should be diverse and multi-faceted,” she says. “This kind of work requires engaging with library colleagues and teaching faculty and students about building digital projects. Ideally, librarians can be an integral part of a digital humanities collaboratory—part of a team that co-equally works together to produce innovative and thought-provoking research.”

The Affordability and Value Challenge

Another factor affecting higher education today is the mounting pressure to lower the cost of education while maintaining or increasing its quality.

Many college applicants and their families are worried about debt; college admissions officials are concerned as well. According to a 2014 survey of college and university admissions directors, slightly more than three-fourths of respondents believe they are losing potential applicants due to concerns about accumulating debt during college. The figure was even greater (89 percent) for those at private colleges (Jaschik 2014).

While there are many factors involved in the cost of education, the price of learning materials is certainly an important one. Digital formats offer new opportunities to address cost and quality, and more universities are transitioning to digital learning materials.

There is also growing awareness and adoption of open educational resources (OER) and affordable educational resources (AER). OER and AER are commonly defined as free or low-cost openly-licensed educational materials that can be used for teaching, learning, and research.

Cengage, Gale’s parent company, recently interviewed industry experts and surveyed more than 500 OER primary adopters, supplemental adopters, and non-adopters. Based on this

research, Cengage determined that OER use could triple over the next five years, to comprise 12 percent of the primary courseware market and 19 percent of the supplemental adoption market. Among faculty members not currently using OER, roughly three-quarters said they expect to be using OER or will consider using it in the next three years (Cengage Learning 2016).

These findings present an opportunity for academic librarians to step up as coordinators and leaders of OER and AER initiatives. Many librarians are doing just that, and they are vocal about their support.

OER and AER are not without obstacles—while there is a vast amount of OER content that could be used in education, discoverability is not easy, and quality and durability are concerns. A 2014 Babson Survey found that the widespread use of OER is hampered primarily by difficulty in finding resources, concerns about unknown permissions and quality, and challenges with integrating the resources. The lack of a comprehensive catalog and the difficulty of finding what is needed were cited most often (Allen and Seaman 2014).

Cue the library. University librarians have the skills needed to overcome these challenges—they are already experts at content curation and acquisition and copyright, and they are likely to have already acquired AER/OER in direct support of courses. Working with faculty, librarians can easily identify and curate content that can support OER and AER initiatives.

Library content offers an excellent opportunity to lower students’ costs while providing peer-reviewed, well-maintained, and consistently updated information. Leveraging library content (and librarian expertise) in campus OER/AER initiatives is an increasingly valuable way for libraries to support key business drivers of the university.

Keep the Momentum Going

Digital scholarship and college affordability are two of the many areas that are ripe for librarians to take on lead-

ership roles, but the opportunities to make an impact don’t stop there. With the value of a college degree being called into question, new standards being considered for rating universities and measuring student learning and career preparedness, and more non-traditional student populations with diverse needs and learning styles being admitted, higher education is facing many challenges to its traditional business model.

These are exciting times for librarians to step up and showcase the unique skills they can bring to the table to help academic institutions thrive. By focusing on the business factors that drive their institutions, they can bridge the gap with faculty and “get in the ball game” with university leaders. **SLA**

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