Transforming Roles for Academic Librarians: Leading and Participating in New Partnerships

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As a beginning point to look at the changing roles of academic librarians, a brief scan of library websites uncovers a dizzying array of titles assigned to library professionals. Just take a look at a few of the titles of librarian positions in academic libraries these days: Repository Architecture Specialist, Bioinformationist, Intellectual Property Officer, Digital User Experience Librarian, Metadata Harvesting Librarian, Global Health Librarian, Curriculum Integration Librarian, Digital Research and Scholarship Librarian, Outreach Librarian, Interface and User Testing Librarian, Instructional Design Librarian, Chief Technology Strategist, Translational Science Information Specialist, and the list goes on.

One might ask if these new titles have confused our users or even librarians themselves. Perhaps. But, does the typical faculty member or student even know our titles. The answer I am quite sure is, "no." Why should they care what librarians are calling themselves? They do care about what we are doing for and, perhaps more importantly, **with** them.

The point is not what we call ourselves. I'll grant you an argument could be made that some of these new titles may intrigue our colleagues on campus and may even garner new respect. And, I'm the first to admit I like some of the new titles and some degree of re-branding for librarians may be desirable. It matters less what we call librarians and matters more that we have confidence that what we offer is valued and that the roles we play are in sync with and critical to the mission of our university.

The "Transforming Research Libraries" section of the ARL Strategic Plan of

2010–2012 speaks of "new and expanding roles for ARL libraries that support, enable, and enrich the transformations affecting research and research-intensive education."[1] Several of the strategies in this segment of the ARL Strategic Plan specifically address the roles of librarians in support of their institutions and research:

> **Strategy 4:** Work with the scholarly community and societies to develop discipline-specific strategies for monitoring and analyzing trends in research practices. Identify opportunities for library / scholar partnerships and clarify the resource and service implications of libraries adopting new roles in advancing research.

> **Strategy 5:** Promote and facilitate the development of a diverse group of library professionals who have the expertise and knowledge to lead and participate in new partnerships with researchers and university faculty.[2]

I think these are strategies that most academic librarians wholeheartedly embrace, as I will discuss later in this article. Before I get to that, I want to take a bit of a departure, which I hope you will find relevant.

Academic Libraries as "Pull" Organizations

I recently read the book, *The Power of Pull*, by John Hagel III, John Seely Brown, and Lang Davison, and noted many concepts within it that could help us as we think about transforming roles for academic librarians. At several junctures, Hagel et al. reference the "super node" as "someone who bridges groups of people who might not otherwise be aware of each other" and who is especially skilled at connecting ideas and people.[3] If that doesn't describe librarians, what does? We are and always will be "super nodes"! Librarians have a distinct and one might even say, unique, vantage point on campus, working with faculty, researchers, IT colleagues, and others from a diverse array of disciplines and areas of expertise. And, the very essence of our profession has been to help make critical connections, particularly between ideas and people. Now, we must take that role even further.

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If you'll bear with me, I'll take a few more concepts from *The Power of Pull*

and put them in the context of the academic library world. This book is based on the premise that we need to move away from a world of "push" and to a world of "pull." The world of "push," as defined by Hagel et al. is predicated on forecasting needs and then designing the most efficient systems to ensure the right people and resources are available at the right time and the right place, often using scripted and standardized processes.[4] Further, the world of "push" focuses on "stocks of knowledge" and "explicit knowledge." Does all of this sound familiar? It should, because academic libraries in many ways have been classic examples of "push" organizations. I hope to demonstrate that academic librarians are also, no doubt unbeknownst to us, early adopters of many of the "pull" concepts (more on this later).

First, some ask why we need to change. Why do we need to move away from "push" to "pull"? Hagel et al. say, "The world is transforming around you. The truth is, the things you did to get there will no longer work to keep you there." They continue, "We no longer live in the industrial economy of the 1950s, or even that of the 1970s. And the techniques we used to master those worlds are no longer effective."[5]

The simplest things in our everyday lives have changed—from hunting up old classmates on Facebook to looking for a hotel room for our family vacation—using a variety of online tools to seek reviews, directions, best price, the quality of the bed linens, etc. As librarians we certainly know the way people look for information and how they approach research has changed dramatically. This most certainly is just the beginning of changes we cannot begin to predict.

Two of the three primary levels of "pull" described by Hagel et al. are particularly applicable to academic librarians:

> At the most basic level, pull helps us to find and **access** people and resources when we need them. At a second level, pull is the ability to **attract** people and resources to you that are relevant and valuable, even if you were not aware before that they existed. Think here of serendipity rather than search.[6]

I can think of many librarian positions that already operate very effectively in a world of "pull." Long known for providing access to information and resources, librarians have gone further with positions such as metadata librarians, digital user experience librarians, and curriculum integration librarians. Librarians in these roles dramatically improve access to library

resources, services, and even librarians whenever the patron needs them by integrating library information and services with campus course management systems and administrative portals. Typically a digital user experience librarian might oversee the web-publishing infrastructure and integrate discovery tools for electronic resources. They implement transformative technologies to improve access and they employ user testing and redesign to gauge and improve the success of these technologies. Metadata specialists have studied and utilized emerging technologies to improve access to objects in the digital library systems.

As mentioned above, the second level of "pull" is the ability to attract, increasing the probability of serendipitous encounters, thereby drawing new people, information, and ideas to you. Here is where I think of embedded librarians or field librarians and their success in this arena. As my colleague, Laurie Alexander, and I described what distinguishes a field librarian at the University of Michigan from a departmental librarian, we said:

> As faculty and students walk through the doors into a depart-
> mental library, the nature of their communication changes.
> Their encounters with librarians are more purposeful, and the
> communication is more formal. When a librarian's office is
> located in the library, he/she tends to be associated with the
> collection and a set of rules and policies wrapped around the use
> of the collection and that physical space. This association changes
> when the librarian's office is located in the department, which
> enables the faculty member to pop his/her head into the field
> librarian's office. A very different dynamic develops (or exists)
> when a faculty member runs into a field librarian while sipping
> coffee in the lounge rather than in the formal setting of a library.
> This shared and familiar environment creates an atmosphere of
> comfort and builds the foundation for a solid working
> relationship. Perhaps even more than originally anticipated, the
> field librarians have built strong relationships with faculty by
> embedding themselves into their communities and thereby, the
> scholarly activities of the faculty.[7]

A good example of the power of serendipity is when the classical studies field librarian learned through a casual hallway conversation that a graduate student intended to travel to Europe to obtain some Greek manuscripts essential

to his dissertation. Not knowing that the field librarian could purchase digital or microfilm copies of those manuscripts for him, the graduate student simply never thought to ask a librarian for help. The student's research needs were only uncovered due to a conversation on another matter. This serendipitous encounter saved the delighted graduate student an expensive trip abroad.[8]

Of course, although there is great value in physical proximity, a virtual presence can be equally important. Another great example of improving the likelihood of serendipitous encounters is an outreach librarian who may be active in social networking sites, enabling librarians and multiple patrons to interact and share dynamically and to learn from one another.

New Roles for Academic Librarians

Perhaps more important to many of you than knowing that academic libraries are forward-looking "pull" organizations, is discussing how we are achieving the strategic directions articulated in the ARL Strategic Plan. In his article, "Accelerating Learning and Discovery: Refining the Role of Academic Librarians," Andrew Dillon wrote:

> The academic library is tied to the academic mission of the university. In contextual terms, we must recognize the shifts in scholarship practices that are occurring in our universities and research labs, and then seek to understand how the library functions appropriately in this new world where large data repositories become the norm for some disciplinary practices; where many students never visit a physical campus, let alone a library; where libraries assume part of the role of publishers; where tenure decisions are loosened from the documentary formats we have known for decades; and where special collections become indistinguishable from museums…. With digital collections becoming boundary objects between academics, librarians, students and designers in a manner that has no obvious historical parallel, the ability to engage in the most fundamental way with the mission of a university will define the importance of academic librarianship in the future.[9]

I wholeheartedly agree with Dillon and also believe many academic librarians across the country are recognizing the shifts he suggests and are

forging new roles for themselves and other librarians. Their roles have extended well beyond what we would have expected from even our most adventurous and innovative librarians a few short years ago. They are deeply integrated into the research fabric of the university and are engaged in a profound manner with the mission of the university.

The best way I can demonstrate my premise is to give you two examples from my own institution, Indiana University (IU). The first example is Angela Courtney, Head of Arts and Humanities at IU Bloomington, as I share the story of one particular project that richly illustrates how she is (to paraphrase the ARL Strategic Plan) supporting, enabling, and enriching the transformations affecting our university.

The Victorian Women Writers Project (VWWP), an Indiana University digital text project, was last updated in 2003. In its heyday in the late 1990s it was groundbreaking, but it had become dated and needed dedicated work to return this once groundbreaking initiative to its rightful place in the digital library community. At the end of 2008, Angela submitted a successful proposal to expand and enhance the VWWP in three directions: to move beyond British women to include women writing in English regardless of national borders, to broaden genres included, and to span the long 19th century rather than the Victorian era. A major goal of this endeavor was to have the VWWP accepted as part of the Networked Infrastructure for Nineteenth-Century Electronic Scholarship (NINES) and this upgrade was the first step.[10]

Then Angela took another important step. Angela began what became many extensive conversations with individual faculty members and faculty groups in the English Department and together they agreed to develop a digital humanities class that would incorporate VWWP and text encoding. Angela met with graduate students who were initially interested in restarting this project because they needed a resource where they could find texts that they wanted to use in teaching and research. They agreed that it would be useful to be involved in encoding and developing contextual materials, but they also felt that, in order to justify the time commitment, these activities would have to be connected to a class. After discussions between Angela and the Victorianists on the faculty, they agreed that this is an important endeavor, but that it should really be a new class rather than an added element in a current class. The English Department Head also agreed, and gave the go-ahead for Angela to work with a faculty member to develop a syllabus.

Meanwhile, working with her hourly students and graduate assistant, Angela developed an extensive genre vocabulary that will be used to classify the works included in the VWWP, based on the Modern Language Association International Bibliography genre terms. She wanted to make the database browsable and searchable by genre, and also wanted the genre list to be as detailed as possible, considerably more complex than prose, poetry, and drama.

What was the outcome of Angela's work? The English Department now recognizes the importance of digital humanities literacy to its graduate students, and there is little doubt this recent shift in thinking is due in large part to Angela's interactions with the department and to the revitalization of the VWWP. Recently, interested parties in the department created a digital humanities e-mail list and began a digital humanities seminar series, and Angela was included as part of this initiative. The class mentioned above will include readings and discussion of the theoretical underpinnings of the digital humanities as well as practical sessions on advanced scholarly text encoding as set out by the Text Encoding Initiative.[11] Students will encode texts for the VWWP, and they will also create secondary contextualizing materials for texts including introductions, bibliographies, and timelines. Angela will co-teach this class with a faculty member and they describe the class as "a hands-on, practical class squarely aimed at investigating the expanding field of the digital humanities as they impact and intersect with literary studies, with regard to key activities and skills of our scholarly lives, current and future: research, editing, teaching, and professional development."

The creation of the digital humanities course, the revitalization of the digital text project, and the faculty awareness of the importance of digital literacy for graduate students were all made possible because of Angela's deep involvement with her colleagues in the English Department. This story illustrates a librarian who has gone beyond the typical subject specialist's role. She truly collaborated with faculty in course development, teaching, and research.

A second example comes from Carrie Donovan, Head, Teaching, and Learning, at IU Bloomington. Carrie was recently on a team of Indiana University faculty from the departments of sociology, anthropology, art, and astronomy who applied for and won a "Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Leadership" grant for their research regarding the use of visual methods as a learning tool central to teaching disciplinary concepts critical to student success. As part of the project, "How Can Visual Methods Enhance Teaching and

Learning in the General Education Classroom? A Multi-Disciplinary and Collaborative Research Project," they spent three years investigating student-generated visual projects. In particular, they examined how such products not only help the learning of key disciplinary concepts but also provide valuable evidence of student learning that can be used for assessment purposes. Carrie worked closely with a sociology faculty member to determine best practices for introducing students to the research and information-seeking process through visual methods.

Carrie was part of a team that approached teaching as a process of inquiry that could inform the development and application of new pedagogy. Instead of being involved in only one aspect of a course as she typically had been in the past (e.g., assignment design, library instruction sessions, etc.), she was able to participate in the development of course outcomes, assignments, and assessments, as well as being a part of their implementation. In working alongside faculty to guide student learning and assess student work, she gained insights into discipline-focused thinking and the foundational knowledge that crosses disciplinary boundaries. Having a better understanding of the issues facing teaching faculty has improved her understanding of the current academic environment in terms of the potential for information literacy education and assessment at the course level and curriculum-wide. To quote Carrie, "So, when I think about information literacy now, I am able to see it as a **learning** initiative, rather than simply a **library** initiative."

Carrie's work represents a great example of a librarian becoming an integral part of the teaching and learning process. But, above all, both of these examples give me great hope that academic libraries are developing "a diverse group of library professionals who have the expertise and knowledge to lead and participate in new partnerships with researchers and university faculty."[12]

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[1] "ARL Strategic Plan 2010–2012," *Research Library Issues: A Bimonthly Report from ARL, CNI, and SPARC,* no. 268 (Feb. 2010): 16, http://www.arl.org/resources/pubs/rli/archive/rli268.shtml.

[2] Ibid., 17.

[3] John Hagel III, John Seely Brown, and Lang Davison, *The Power of Pull: How Small Moves, Smartly Made, Can Set Big Things in Motion* (New York: Basic Books, 2010): 90, 158.

[4] Ibid., 47.

[5] Ibid., 32.

[6] Ibid., 9.

[7] Brenda L. Johnson and Laurie A. Alexander, "Reaching Beyond the Walls of the Library," in *The Desk and Beyond: Next Generation Reference Services*, ed. Sarah K. Steiner and M. Leslie Madden (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2008): 31.

[8] Ibid., 29.

9   Andrew Dillon, "Accelerating Learning and Discovery: Refining the Role of Academic Librarians,"
     in *No Brief Candle: Reconceiving Research Libraries for the 21st Century* (Washington, DC: Council on
     Library and Information Resources, 2008): 53.

10   NINES is a scholarly organization devoted to forging links between the material archive of the
     19th century and the digital research environment of the 21st. For more information, see the NINES
     website: http://www.nines.org/about/what_is.html.

11   The Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) is a consortium that collectively develops and maintains a
     standard for the representation of texts in digital form. For more details, see the TEI website:
     http://www.tei-c.org/index.xml.

12   "ARL Strategic Plan 2010–2012," 17.

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