

Developing a Vital Research Library Workforce

Mark A. Puente, Director of Diversity Programs, ARL

In a recent report entitled “The Once and Future Library,” based on a study commissioned by the Herman Miller corporation, researchers present a view of the future academic library that includes dramatic transformations of roles librarians will be playing in the future—from the “keepers of the flammable inventory” to the role of knowledge navigator, presiding over spaces and services that are increasingly collaborative, complex, and dynamic.¹

The full impact of the recent economic downturn will not be fully understood for some time, however, it is clear that it has accelerated the assessment of workflows, personnel structures, acquisitions priorities, and every other facet of the workings of research libraries today. Anecdotal evidence tells us that libraries and information centers are reorganizing, outsourcing, consolidating service points, weeding collections, and making any other adjustments necessary to telegraph the flexibility of the organization and the willingness to implement new strategies for provision of services relevant to the modern research enterprise.

What remain to be seen are the long-term implications for the research library workforce in terms of the staffing needs and anticipated competencies for library and information professionals of the future. These competencies include subject-domain expertise and functional and/or sociopolitical acumen that will be needed as organizations continue to evolve in response to continued economic pressures, changing pedagogical strategies, and rapid evolutions in the way researchers today search for, consume, and, in some instances, create knowledge. In a broader social context, complexity increases when dealing with the question of best practices for creating services that are best suited for researchers who are “next-gen,” “digital natives,” or other appropriate synonyms. Throw in the added layer of shifting demographics

in the higher education community and you have a perfect storm for confusion and lack of consensus about what the future research library workforce should or will look like.

Paraphrasing from the aforementioned Herman Miller report:

“The diversity of ethnicities, experiences, ages, income, ... and expectations of [researchers] create opportunities for libraries to be equally diverse in their management of spaces, delivery of services, [and composition of personnel.]”²

Therefore, the research library of today must task itself with developing a workforce with the skills and competencies to further the mission of the institution, whether serving an academic community or public constituency. The library must develop this vital workforce in anticipation of evolving research practice of users in traditional and emerging domains of scholarly inquiry, rapidly changing behavior in seeking and evaluating information, and the growing diversity inherent in the learning communities they serve. These changing needs create a new imperative for recruiting and retaining a research library workforce that will be effective in this dynamic research environment. Moreover, the research library workforce of the future will have to be adept at creating and fostering collaborations with entities within and outside of their institutions due to sustained budgetary pressures and in order to signal to higher level administration that libraries can remain relevant in the age of Google, Wikipedia, and Flickr.

What are then, some of the considerations in this new imperative? What are the skill sets that will be needed to ensure that 21st-century libraries begin to or continue to evolve and properly support the needs of 21st-century researchers? How do libraries frame conversations on this topic during a time of continued economic volatility and stresses to provide more and better with less and fewer? Offered here are several suggestions for this new imperative, suggestions for establishing some priorities for recruitment, and brief commentary on the broad implications for research-intensive organizations.

New Imperatives for Developing a Vital 21st-Century Research Library Workforce

We must develop a vital research library workforce able to provide quality services to growing multicultural, multinational student and faculty constituencies.

With the exception of a precipitous decline in international student enrollment following the events of September 11, 2001, enrollment of international students in higher education continues to increase. In 2008–2009, the Institute of International Education reported that the universities with the top 20 enrollments of international students were campuses served by ARL member libraries.³ Representation of racial and ethnic minorities in higher education, as well, is undergoing a steady transformation. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), representation of ethnic and racial minorities in higher education is expected to grow at a rate far surpassing their non-Hispanic, white counterparts. According to projections, in the period from 2007 to 2018, enrollment of Hispanics/Latinos in institutions of higher learning will increase by 38%; the projections are 32% for American Indian/Alaska natives, 29% for Asian/Pacific Islanders, and 26% for African Americans or blacks.⁴ This reality calls for research libraries to consider the implications for library collections and services of this changing demographic profile in the academy. It is incumbent upon the research library community to anticipate staffing needs in response to these demographic changes, reaching beyond simple representation of the library workforce, and assessing cultural competencies and language fluencies necessary for maintaining and improving customer service.

We must develop a vital research library workforce equipped to deal with research needs of faculty, graduates, and undergraduates working in subject domains and collections with increasingly global orientations.

The development of the Internet and improved access to national and global resources (both in traditional print formats and realia, as well as primary source materials available in digital formats) is paving the way for increased collaboration between teachers and researchers on intra- and international scales. Ease of access provided by technological advances, often facilitated by research libraries, is helping to bring researchers together even in synchronous

collaborations never before thought possible. This global orientation is encouraging the development of international scholarly inquiry that needs the support of information and data managers to navigate effectively through the changing landscape. In addition, with a growing emphasis on special and unique collections, particularly in the humanities and arts, one would posit that the acquisition, curation, and dissemination of said materials would require cross-cultural competencies and language skills that will ensure the appropriate management of these collections or their digital surrogates. Library and information professionals will be needed with appropriate subject domain expertise as well as technical skills to facilitate global collaborations and to organize the resources, data, and content they generate.

We must develop a vital research library workforce ready to enthusiastically provide support for collaborative learning and research content creation, even on the undergraduate level.

As more and more resources become available via the World Wide Web, and research libraries deploy solutions (such as high-density storage) that free up physical space, institutions are retooling facilities to create learning environments that support collaborative study and expanded library services, and that essentially respond to changing pedagogies in higher education. The modern research library workforce must be equipped with expertise to support these changing approaches to teaching and learning, and to assist in the creation of multimedia or data-rich research projects that are increasingly part of the educational enterprise. The mention of undergraduates in this imperative is appropriate since high-level research output has, traditionally, been seen as the domain of graduate students and faculty, but that is no longer the case. This approach begs an assessment of the skills and competencies being taught in the current master of library and information science (MLIS) curriculum. Technical skills in multimedia production software, data-literacy competencies, or fluency with metadata schema and standards will remain important in the modern research library workforce. Equally important, however, may be the ability to envision, create, and manage spaces for experiential learning exercises, encourage experimentation and creativity in collaborative projects, or many other social or soft skills—knowledge that may or may not be reflected in MLIS curricula.

We must develop a research library workforce that is wholly collaborative—building and contributing to library, campus, regional, national, and international partnerships and projects.

What has become part of the formula in job descriptions today is the ability for library and information professionals to adapt to change and adjust priorities in dynamic professional environments. This has never been truer as libraries work to leverage resources and build partnerships with outside organizations in areas such as collection management, cataloging and metadata, e-research, and large-scale digitization. Within the institution, what is certainly needed is a workforce with the subject expertise to engage with faculty and researchers in critical data-management programs that include born-digital materials (images, datasets, media) and in emerging subject disciplines.

Similarly, the models for liaison responsibilities in academic institutions are being redefined and developed, shaped by factors such as the need to be more fully engaged with instructional faculty in processes to determine priorities for collection development; the need to be proactive in the determination of desired learning outcomes in information and data-literacy exercises, etc. It is clear that the future workforce will need to continue to evaluate those roles and build effective collaborations that enhance the teaching and research priorities of the constituencies they serve.

Conclusion

These imperatives are but a few of the considerations in developing a vital research library workforce. If the modern library is to serve as the laboratory for supporting dynamic, interactive, and sometimes experimental information consumption and creation, then the library workforce of the future will need to have a diverse range of skills, aptitudes, competencies, and soft skills to support those teaching and learning methodologies. Moreover, the need has never been greater for library and information professionals to embody a collaborative orientation as they engage in dialogue about the information needs of their constituencies and as they think creatively about ways to embed themselves in the research process. So much more could be said about specific areas of expertise needed to contribute to research and education, including knowledge of scholarly publishing, intellectual property rights, web development and database building, and myriad other technical competencies.

Perhaps it is time to re-think the approaches for recruitment into the

profession and to have conversations about the educational and professional requirements that will ensure the development of a workforce best suited to meet the needs of this rapidly changing research enterprise. A logical place to begin these discussions is with researchers—professors, students, and other scholars in research institutions—who, presumably, know better than anyone about needs that are not being met and about projections for how their disciplines are evolving with regard to the changing information needs and learning models being used in higher education.

¹ Herman Miller Inc., “The Once and Future Library: Research Summary,” 2010, <http://www.hermanmiller.com/Research/>.

² Ibid., 3.

³ Institute of International Education, “Open Doors FAQs,” <http://www.iie.org/en/Research-and-Publications/Open-Doors/FAQ/>.

⁴ National Center for Education Statistics, “Projections of Education Statistics to 2018,” September 2009, http://nces.ed.gov/programs/projections/projections2018/app_a2.asp.

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