

Guest Editorial

Surviving the Flood

Higher education institutional effectiveness depends on the quality and delivery of their information resources. Traditionally, institutions have looked to their libraries and librarians for the expertise and capability to fulfill this responsibility. As institutions approach the twenty-first century, several agendas that change and challenge the traditional view of information resources are being developed.

The amount of information being produced each year doubles, flooding the marketplace. Formats become more varied. Faculty and students comment about information overload and the need to sort out relevant information. Users are requesting that libraries develop systems that provide fast access to multiple sources, so they can "sort out" the data for their particular need. This access must be available from a variety of locations, not just on campuses and in the library. Academic users are not willing to turn over their information needs to others for sorting and packaging.

Recent developments in information technology have had a greater impact on academic libraries than any other single action. Practices, such as information organization, storage, and retrieval, have been transformed. The implementation of information technologies could not have happened at a worse time for academic librarians. Academic libraries have been experiencing declining budgets since the late 1980s. While attempting to embrace the new technologies, most libraries must continue operating with old technologies.

Both the increase in the amount of information being produced and the implementation of information technology

have occurred at a time when higher education institutions are rethinking the economic model for academic library funding. Access to personal computers by students and faculty have encouraged the assumption that information based activity can happen any place at any time with the use of a telephone line. Access to technology has also delighted faculty and students, who claim they can now bypass the library when searching for information.

The rapid increase in the information available in electronic formats and further implementation of information technology have initially allowed computing centers to take on new roles and responsibilities. Some institutions have accepted the challenge of bringing libraries and computing centers together in a single organizational unit. Other institutions are bracing for tough turf wars between the computing center and the library to decide who will control campus information. In general, computing center staff believe that librarians are incapable of mastering the new technology to the extent necessary for higher education institutions to receive the greatest benefits. Librarians are aware that information is growing in complexity and that delivery is only one component. With these conflicting levels of awareness, how can academic librarians even hope to lead the academic community into creating the information society of the twenty-first century?

I recently read about alliances desired between corporations, including IBM and Apple Computer, as well as Digital and Microsoft. The press regularly reports on collaborations created among public school systems and businesses.

These models encourage cooperation for a common good. A question for academic librarians is: *What is our goal for an information society, and can the goal be reached in isolation?*

Think about the possibility of creating alliances. It seems to me there are five major questions:

- *Who* are the natural players on your campuses?

Obvious candidates are other information stakeholders such as the computing centers, communications centers, reprographics centers, and learning technology centers.

- *What* are some of the day-to-day realities?

Missions of the obvious candidates are similar, but each area has developed from a different academically based expertise.

- *When* will the common good be achieved?

Through combining efforts during periods of rapid technological and information expansion and economic restraints, multiple units can develop effective ways of meeting the information needs of the academic community.

- *Where* will the information actually be?

Through combining efforts, a variety of formats can be appropriately housed. Naturally, most of the print will be in the library. Collaboration with other campus constituencies will provide effective access to myriad available information resources.

- *How* will information be accessed?

There will be a variety of access points, and users should be educated

at their initial entry point. This could take place at the library, computing center, classroom, dormitory, or an individual office. The education will encompass all information points accessible to members of the campus community.

Academic librarians have been successful in creating collaboratives. Collaborations between librarians and faculty are common occurrences. For example, when librarians work with faculty on a program or an instructional package, they usually share responsibilities. Librarians have also been skillful in reaching outside the academic community to create collaboratives. Examples include areas such as preservation, intellectual freedom, copyright, and futuristic collaborative planning such as the NREN.

ACRL has a long history of strengthening the role of the academic librarian in the academy. Creating collaboratives and building alliances are additional ways ACRL can support academic librarians and librarianship.

The recent flooding in Chicago demonstrated to me the horrors that can result from the lack of infrastructure upgrading. Academic librarianship is at a critical crossroad. Rapid changes and growth are occurring in all information technologies. How can librarians bridge alliances to build the appropriate information infrastructures so our users don't drown in the flood of information?

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