

Paper #6: Universal Libraries

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Background:

While the printed book is still a valuable tool for teaching and learning on our campuses, large-scale book digitization projects are encroaching on the traditional bulwark of the college library and its collections, which were built to support specific undergraduate curricula and basic research needs. The rapid and increasingly ubiquitous unbundling of the traditional journal, on the other hand, has created real opportunities for college libraries in the form of increased access to the scholarly literature while simultaneously decreasing the footprint within libraries devoted to the storage of print back runs. New forms of digital content published on the web are also making clear that college libraries can be the home of locally created knowledge (student and faculty created), as well as commercially produced publications collected in a coherent manner.

LSDIs and the Future of the Book:

Google Books, the Open Content Alliance, Microsoft Live Books, and the Million Book Project are all very *large scale digitization initiatives* (LSDIs) that seek to provide access to millions of books following a scanning strategy originally developed for the JSTOR journal archive project. Taken together, these ambitious projects seek to create nothing less than a universal library based upon the corpus of print collections held by the major research libraries around the world. Issues related to access, metadata standards and, of course, preservation, come to the fore immediately. But for the purpose of this discussion the focus is on the potential impact on college library collection development and the central mission of liberal arts teaching and learning. Given the historic emphasis of college libraries on teaching and learning based upon the codex form of the book, what can we expect to happen in the near future and what will be the impact of these developments on traditional notions of literacy derived from the print medium?

The Role of Scholarly Publishers and the Book:

Albert Greco sums up the issue thusly:

Seismic shifts in library budgets, triggered by declines in budgetary increases, endowments...and the cost of journals, have adversely affected university presses by resulting in reductions in the number of books purchased and the cancellation of some journal subscriptions...the economics of scholarly publishing are harsh and unforgiving, and it seems likely that this shift in the academic library market marks a permanent and

negative downward trend for most university presses, a trend that is not likely to change in the coming years.

Leaving aside the huge question of how this development affects the larger system of scholarly communication, the issue of the future of primarily humanities and social sciences book collections and how college libraries might plan for that future is increasingly complicated and uncertain. On the one hand, the huge investment that college libraries have made in order to acquire the historic resources necessary for teaching and learning in the liberal arts has been brought into question by the decline of scholarly publishing and the concomitant inability to commit additional resources to the development of printed book collections. On the other hand, even if library acquisition budgets were not under severe pressure due to the impact of the cost of scholarly journals (particularly in the sciences), there is no predictable outcome in the near term that would allow college libraries to redeploy resources in a strategic way.

Liberal Arts Strategies for the Future:

Perhaps most important, given the crucial significance of the critical literacies associated with reading, writing, and analyzing intellectual content in printed formats, is the question of what unique role college libraries can play in continuing to provide access to the literatures that support academic work in the social sciences and humanities.

Which, if any, of these strategies, would be reasonable to pursue?

1. Continue the current strategy of cutting back on monographic acquisitions in order to fund the increasingly uncontrollable costs of journals in the scientific disciplines.
2. Overlook the current and long-term issues inherent in the technologies and platforms of e-books, and invest in e-book collections to provide content to meet user demands, understanding that this same content may need to be purchased again as platforms evolve.
3. Leverage investments by collaborating with other academic institutions in order to acquire as much monographic content in both print and digital formats.
4. Follow the lead of the larger research institutions as the mobilization of resources starts to move in one direction or another.

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