Waiting for the Future
By Rick Provine

I've been thinking a lot about the future lately. At least, that's what I think I should be doing. All of the literature tells me so. The Association of College and Researh Libraries (ACRL) released the "Top Ten Assumptions for the Future of Academic Libraries and Librarians: A Report from the ACRL Research Committee" (Mullins, Allen, and Hufford, 2007). Staley and Malenfant (2010) offered "Futures Thinking for Academic Librarians: Higher Education in 2025." There's more. Lots more.

Maybe if we looked more broadly at "the future." I visited NewsOfTheFuture.com to see what they had to say. I typed "libraries" in their search box. Nothing. Yikes!

So we have our discovery layer…check. Our digital library is up and running…check. EBooks…check. Excellent customer service… check. What now? Magic 8 Ball? Soothsayers? Alvin Toffler reading group? Stephen Abram on speed dial?

Then I saw it… "The Future of the Liberal Arts College Library Symposium." This was exactly what I needed. Kismet! So off to Milwaukee. Surely their command of beer and cheese could only enhance our ability to see what's coming?

But while I was there, I couldn't help but notice we mostly talked about our immediate future. Like tomorrow, next week, or after lunch. People are concerned with what's happening now. The future is swell, but what do we do in the meantime?

Back at home, I wondered what my Private Academic Library Network of Indiana (PALNI) colleagues were doing, thinking, and planning about the future? Were they able to put aside their day-to-day cares and woes to ensure sunshine and rainbows down the road?

I asked. Here is what some of my colleagues say…

> My chief concern for our near-future here stems from my perception that the institutional perspective is one that has moved further away from the library as integral to the mission toward one where the library is but a department to be managed providing constraints to optimal service in support of said mission.

Hmmm. That doesn't sound too good.

> My concern is not so much the future of the liberal arts college library, but whether liberal arts colleges will still exist in 2021. Assuming annual tuition increases at 6% above inflation (the historical trend) and a 2011 average baseline price just north of $40,000, my 10-year-old son can expect to pay $300,000 to attend a national liberal arts college one decade from now.

And further…

> I believe the success and in some cases the survival of Library Services for libraries in Liberal Arts Institutions will hinge upon the library's level of integration into the General Education curriculum via Information Literacy skills requirements and assessment.Without this integration, libraries become silos of information.

OK. So while we are figuring out our future, we need to save higher education as well.

I am going to have to start working Sundays.

What about specifics?

> In order to stay relevant, academic libraries must remain in a state of flux for the foreseeable future. We have

no way of knowing today the types of resources or the delivery systems we will be offering ten (or even five) years from now. Flexibility is the key to survival.

Flexible. Got it.

Even as libraries are rapidly moving from physical collections to electronic resources, we are still pouring too many resources (financial and personnel) into print processes. We must define new roles as teachers and digital resource creators/managers in order to remain essential in new learning environments.

And…

I have been struggling with the question of access versus ownership and all that entails in terms of budget, resource sharing, digital rights management, copyright, and preservation of information. I am concerned that if the majority of information becomes available only in electronic form coupled with prices out of range of my budget and restrictions on what's allowed and not allowed – e.g. such limits as no interlibrary loan – that this will impact libraries and the services we provide in a negative way. In addition, electronic resource management requires a great deal of time and effort as we need to keep on top of license terms, authentication, titles added or deleted from various online collections, and all the other work needed to ensure timely and accurate delivery of digital information.

And…

During the last 10 years, we have reduced subscriptions to print journals from more than 700 to about 275. We find no evidence that more than a handful of these current titles are ever opened by anyone. Within five years, we either will no longer subscribe to any printed periodicals, or we will only be doing it for show.

Dump the print. Check.

In a nutshell, here is where I see our library going:
-- Transformation of space into a learning commons
-- Journals completely online (currently we still have over 400 print subscriptions)
-- E-books on demand
-- Continued support of relevant print collections

OK. We can keep some of the print. So what about staffing?

[Our] biggest challenge is effectively managing a set of increasingly complex library management and discovery tools that are changing many of our current library practices. Developing the knowledge and skills needed to unlock the potential of these resources while providing traditional library services is a difficult balancing act.

"Difficult balancing act." That goes in next year's annual report.

I find myself worrying about staffing and budget. We're trying to do so much already and of course every year we are asked to do more with the same or less than we had the year before. I wonder as budgets shrink if more liberal arts colleges will find themselves more and more short-staffed as jobs may be cut to save money.

Less money. Fewer people. They told me none of this in library school.

But, there is some good news.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for us is the growing ambivalence toward the role of the library in the academic community. Too often the disintermediation of libraries in the process of information discovery and knowledge creation is accepted as inevitable.

Increasingly Google and Wikipedia are offered as proof that libraries (and librarians) are no longer relevant to the processes of information management and dissemination. Yet most in the community admit to being overwhelmed by the flood of information released via the Internet, and acknowledge a need to regulate the flow. Therein lies our greatest opportunity.

Well, sort of good news. At least there is opportunity. But how?

1 - connect library resources and services more integrally with the curriculum

2 - more aggressively move to on-demand acquisition

3 - further re-purpose physical space to encourage learning and research and to promote connections with library resources

4 - knowing what to stop doing in order to do the new thing

At last! Directions!

I seem to have hit a psychological wall thinking about the future. But I know one thing…I am not alone. A cursory reading of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* conveys the angst not only of librarians, but also of faculty members afraid and confused about libraries.

I don't have any answers. It is obvious that the transitions taking place in scholarship, publishing, and technology will play a huge role. As we wait to hit 88 miles per hour and leap into the future, one thing we know for sure…we will have to work together to get there. The myriad pressures of time, money, and change make it impractical for each of us to individually develop the library of the future. The future is now. And we are not alone.

Thanks to my PALNI colleagues for allowing me to have a little fun at their expense. I treasure and value their insight, advice, help and collegiality. I have never worked with a more dedicated and supportive group.

Bio

Rick Provine is the Director of Libraries at DePauw University, and has been at DePauw since 2000. He previously held positions at the University of Virginia and Indiana University. He received a BA and MLS from Indiana University in Bloomington. He has served as Chair of several organizations, including the Private Academic Library Network of Indiana, the ALA Video Round Table, and the ACRL Media Resources Committee.