What the Academic Library Means to Me/Us/Them

By: Michael Crumpton

Abstract:

The world is slowly getting back to normal after the pandemic and at this writing is grappling with other challenges of conflict and financial concern. Normal is also referred to as the "new" normal, meaning things won't go back to what they were, but what they've become, and the expectation is that it will stay that way or continually change in some way. This leads us to re-envision what an academic library means to ourselves personally (**Me**), library faculty and staff as part of the new team dynamics (**Us**) and to our stakeholders (**Them**) who depend on us for so many things.

The idea behind this forum is to recognize that it is not business as usual for academic libraries and it provides opportunity to reflect on what an academic library means in new perspectives. The pillars of librarianship: materials, instruction (people) and space are all changing, or perceptions are changing as to the role and value placed in the different attributes of academic librarianship. The uniqueness of academic libraries, as academic partners in unique institutions can also foster a creativity element in creating a new normal.

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Introduction

A lot has changed over the past several years, from improvements to technology to challenges to the dynamics of higher education and beyond. Academic libraries have been steadfast in handling the chaotic activities that society has been dealing with and this shapes perception of our role going forward. Our future is essential to student success factors across a variety of venues, we can't lose sight of that, but how we get there might look different.

As librarians, we are faced with a variety of changes within our institutions that impact our jobs and positions, and it is important to manage that change productively. Having the right connections to higher administration's purposes and objectives is critical to adapting these changes to the library. With enrollment declines continuing across the higher education venue, expecting change to come and preparing to find needed efficiencies to sustain the operation is critical.

Managing US

Consideration of current job functions for everyone would be appropriate to recognize the impact on the library organization both collectively and individually. Determining priorities in the face of declining resources should be standard, to ensure student success priorities continue to meet the institutional need. Also needing to be considered is the individual value and satisfaction of a position, as one of the current trends in the workforce relates to an upheaval in people changing jobs for a wide variety of reasons. Academic libraries are not an exception to that.

As a workplace, the academic library is undergoing significant change as higher education institutions also are changing to meet new demographic, financial and competitive factors. The library as a traditional center of knowledge and more currently user centered learning space, must make the changes necessary to maintain the library as a campus hub, of non-bias or non-judgmental learning. This invokes many competing priorities in the larger environment such as the student experience, EDI factors, financial efficiencies, mental health challenges and others that can raise objections from faculty and staff both in the library and in the institution.

The lessons coming from the COVID years are demonstrating how the perception and use of libraries are changing. No longer just a warehouse for books, demand for resources are immediate, and the understanding of the appropriate scrutiny needed for accuracy and ethical considerations is even more important as libraries are the experts in a virtual space as well. The library must adjust to a flexible mindset of service delivery and be adaptable for changing pedagogies, research options and formats desired by students and faculty.

Are we ready for this? Does this align with the principles learned and practiced from our library degree experience as well as professional development opportunities since? Do we have ongoing conversations about these changes and how to respond to them? No matter what individual perceptions are across the larger issues of physical vs. virtual, print vs. electronic or librarian partnerships with faculty and students, approaching a new normal collectively is paramount to success.

What about Them?

Our stakeholders are also living through times of change and attempting to connect the dots with their goals and objectives, some facing changes to their circumstances such as resource/financial declines, mental health related issues, child/elder care issues and perhaps adjustments to their career trajectories. COVID exposed a lot of disparity across the lines of equality and access that are also part of the changing climate of "normal". And students are people also.

Enrollment declines are now of important consideration for institutions of higher education (https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-shrinking-of-higher-ed) which impacts academic libraries in multiple ways. Besides financial impacts with budget reductions or staffing shortages, libraries are also faced with a changing student population whose perception of the library could be different than what we expected it to be. At the same time, teaching faculty cover a wide range of perceptions and professed expectations of the library from static (no change needed) to futuristic, wanting the library to cover multiple formats, service options and from the space point of view, spaces to embrace a multitude of logistical needs.

The campus itself is different post COVID as hybrid instruction takes a focus off the classroom in particular and brings a focused purpose into other activities and physical spaces such as laboratories, makerspaces, innovation labs, spaces that are active and connect users in achieving learning goals. This means libraries and library staffs must recognize these changes and react accordingly. Beyond space this also means collection development, methods of library instruction and ideas driven toward a communal need rather than academic study only.

Recruitment and retention are essential in higher education to maintain a consistent student flow and sustain operations over time. The academic library needs to be at that table as a partner in both the recruitment effort of new students and with the retention effort in student success factors. Participating in campus tours, speaking to the value of the library to student's academic journeys and serving as a connection point for academic achievement are all ways that libraries can participate in the shared success of campus continuality.

Academic libraries must provide purposeful and resourceful actions, services, expertise and environments to have partnership with campus facility and other units charged with student success initiatives. Most academic libraries have liaison networks for librarians to engage in with subject departments to identify and drive needs into centralized library operations and philosophies. These liaison networks have moved over the years from collection development-based roles to broader service and collaboration roles to meet larger quantitative needs. Could the next step be determining a more focused but changing need in order to pivot with change?

It comes back to Me

Over 10 years ago R. David Lankes published the Atlas of New Librarianship, in which we are encouraged to see ourselves differently, as facilitators of knowledge creation, and what better place is there to do that then in an academic library. Lankes was promoting the rethinking of librarianship to fit a society disengaging from traditional methods and driving innovation and entrepreneurial ideas in a modern and dynamic technology enhanced environment.

The last several years of COVID has advanced these concepts to include the need to address efficiencies due to declining budgets, greater flexibility in addressing stakeholder needs due to changing demographics of students, changing teaching pedagogies and controversy over maintaining traditional values of print resources and history archiving. Looking forward the future is not predictable and can be very customized based on institutional values of which could be changing as well.

As librarians we need to revisit our principal core beliefs to stay aligned with the parent institution and address changing the "how" we connect with stakeholders. We need to make decisions that are for the good of students and faculty while assessing and embracing what's changing for them as well, in order to preserve our value and ensure their success.

To do this might mean letting go of the **Me**, to collaborate with the **Us**, to provide meaning to the **Them**. We should start with self-reflection of our own perceptions, form collaborative understandings with colleagues and engage our stakeholders to assess their true need. The changing of perceptions is the first step in changing actions in order to align with goals and objectives for the greater good. Open dialog is not always personally satisfying but as a best practice can find a reward in changing perceptions and the meaning of what an academic library can do.

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About the author:

Michael A. Crumpton, MLS, SHRM-SCP, is the Interim Dean for the University Libraries at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro as well as an affiliated faculty member for the Department of Library and Information Studies. Mike is the past president of the North Carolina Library Association.