

Preferred futures for libraries

The Research Libraries Group (RLG) held six workshops with university provosts and library directors on the future of academic libraries; Peter Judge has excerpted a few key points from their report

JAMES MICHALKO, the President of RLG (who is to be one of the keynote speakers at the ALIA '92 Conference in Wagga Wagga), recently issued a report on *Preferred Futures for Libraries*. The excerpts that follow are taken from this report, which resulted from a series of one-day workshops bringing together directors of research libraries with their chief academic officers (CAOs). It was RLG's conviction that the issues library directors were facing could only be successfully engaged with the mutual understanding and support of the academic administration.

In the initial planning stage, RLG expected the workshop participants to address the extraordinary and mounting challenges of the research information infrastructure—increasing complexity, escalating costs, and the need to transform the nature of libraries and the model of library service. They aimed to formulate a set of strategic directions to serve as a framework in which campuses could address the way universities and their research libraries operate.

To organise and operate the sessions RLG retained Richard Dougherty and Carol Hughes from the University of Michigan School of Information and Library Studies, who wrote the report. Over 60 librarians and CAOs from 41 academic institutions took part.

Provosts and librarians share an image of the future of information resources on their campus. They all strongly prefer a future in which there is universal access by faculty and students to multiple information sources in all possible media via a single multifunctional workstation. Other images of a preferred future are jointly held—all require basic cultural changes in the academy beyond the control of library director or chief academic officer.

The sponsor and facilitators of these workshops observed that there is considerable misunderstanding between chief academic officer and librarian about the acceptable degree of risk-taking, the difficulty of the transition, the leadership that is demanded, the impact on space and faculty needs, and the role of cooperation and resource sharing in achieving this preferred future. No common strategies that apply across campuses are likely, and individual institutions have not yet successfully defined the elements of a solution that fits their unique circumstances.

Eventually, some concrete response to demands from students and faculty for a more highly sophisticated information environment will be necessary on every campus.

Leadership in the articulation of campus priorities, innovation in the development of demonstration projects, and long-term strategic relocations of resources from various sources will be required if the vision of the future is to be more than a mirage.

Emerging trends

Trends that will most heavily influence a particular campus's preferred future become clear in the process of transforming visions into action-oriented plans. The unprioritised list of trends compiled during workshop sessions included the following:

- Developing the National Research and Education Network
- Strengthening undergraduate education
- Increasingly constrained budgets
- Proliferating information sources and spiralling costs of materials
- Pressing space and facilities maintenance needs
- Changing scholarly communication system
- Expanding international studies and programs
- Increasing interdependence of library and computing centre
- Decreasing prestige of higher education in society
- Growing difficulties in recruiting and retaining personnel
- Shifting student demographics
- Building relationships with the commercial sector
- Growing importance of government relations

The universal workstation environment

The wired campus, with workstations universally available, was an image that emerged at all of the workshops. For the sake of brevity, this image will be referred to as the universal workstation access image. It encompasses the concept of 'seamless' or 'transparent' access by faculty and students to a variety of resources from multifunctional workstations.

Considering the degree of exposure that the electronic environment has received in the literature, it is not surprising that this image repeatedly surfaced. A variety of versions were projected: an integrated library/computer facility, transparent to the user; comprehensive access to national databases in all formats; information 'virtually' accessible in one place; workstations for everyone for all of the information needed; a ►

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- universal terminal that can handle multimedia in all formats; workstation access to all media—in many locations; universal access to databases, regardless of user and resource location.

This image remained central even though participants also identified some formidable obstacles. For example, there were concerns about the cost of the technologies so essential to create a workstation environment; rapid obsolescence of technology; the myth that technology will solve all of our problems. Librarians referred numerous times to their fear that officials possessed an over-simplified view of a future without books.

The community of scholars and librarians

Four groups developed images of a community of scholars as another preferred future. This image emphasised a strong role for librarians as part of a team composed of faculty, students, and researchers. Variations on this theme were offered: full integration of the library into academic programs; librarians working with faculty and students designing teaching materials and research programs; libraries as hubs where scholars gather; library and librarians more integrated into the academic culture; librarians and teaching faculty collaborating in scholarly communication and teaching; and a community of scholars where distinctions among professors, graduate students, and undergraduate students are less important.

Risk taking

Most of the images clearly reflected a conviction that technology will dramatically change libraries. Some provosts and the majority of librarians seemed to prefer to see the library continuing to play a central role. But it was also acknowledged that not only libraries will change—librarians must overhaul many of their traditional roles to remain in the game.

This is not a new observation. But the workshops emphasised that CAOs are ready for the change now. Several provosts asked pointed questions of the librarians at the meeting: What are librarians willing to give up? What do they see themselves not doing in ten years?

The opportunity to fill a central role is still open, but the library community itself must proactively identify and adopt new and changing responsibilities. Librarians cannot wait for permission to change what they are doing. CAOs want to see change, but they don't have the time to engineer it personally—librarians will have to take the risk. That was a message we heard loud and clear.

Transitions

Another significant observation concerned the widespread lack of vision about how we get there from here. The workshops did not provide sufficient time to transform preferred futures into pieces of an articulated action plan. But it was apparent that few people had given serious thought to the costs of operating parallel print and electronic systems during the transition years. In most instances, the conversation came to an abrupt stop when someone asked, 'Who will pay the bill?'

Only one CAO mentioned that his campus was working to involve faculty in discussions about the new environment. Usually there were no answers to questions such as: 'How will transition strategies reflect the differences in information

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structure among disciplines? How will one convince faculty to tolerate the transition from the traditional library to one in which there is a greater balance between ownership (local collections) and access (acquisition on demand from other sources) to information? What services will the campus faculty permit the library to reduce or terminate?

Very few campuses seem to have thought through these questions, which unfortunately represent only the tip of the iceberg of 'universal access.' One is left with the general impression that, in spite of what campuses term 'strategic planning,' efforts to date have fallen dramatically short of what will be required. More likely, campuses are identifying strategic directions they wish to pursue, but they have not yet become specific about what resources are necessary and available to get them to the future they desire.

Technology oversold

Some participants felt that technology has been oversold. While no one challenged the capabilities of technology, no one demanded that the spread of technology be closely tied to the success of the university at its mission. Without understanding how investments in technology are related to gains in campus productivity, there will be no way to balance information-related priorities with other needs. This balancing will have to be done. The enormous costs of creating a sophisticated network environment and replacing obsolescent equipment are already forcing institutions to make decisions without understanding a critical part of the tradeoffs involved.

Educational preparation and training of librarians

The suggestion of new roles for librarians and the advocacy of risk-taking behaviour raised issues about the educational preparation and training of librarians. This issue is now being hotly debated among library school faculty and professionals. There is a concern that the profession is increasingly unable to attract the best and brightest, even though library schools report an increasing number of well-qualified candidates. Educational preparation of librarians will continue to be a priority concern throughout the 1990s, and frank conversations between library educators and practitioners about the nature of this education must take place now.

These excerpts from the RLG report are given added relevance by the national seminar held on 12 June by the University of NSW: *Confronting the Future—University Libraries in the Next Decade*. An account of this seminar will appear in a future issue of *inCite*.