

Envisioning the 21st Century Research Library — Faculty Perspectives

The role of research libraries is changing as information technology expands the ways faculty and students create, manage, and use scholarly and creative content. The UO Library has been on the forefront of many of these changes, and must continue to embrace change as an opportunity for innovation and leadership. To that end it is important that we reflect and envision what a research library should be in the 21st century.

ULC Summary of Focus Groups

During the first week of spring term, the University Library Committee (ULC) sponsored a series of focus groups for faculty who serve as their departmental liaisons to the library. The goal was to have faculty discuss how their research and teaching are changing. This input would then help to shape the next iteration of the library's strategic plan. Twenty-six faculty participated from a cross-section of the university. All schools and colleges were represented.

While faculty were encouraged to think into the future, immediate concerns dominated the conversations. There were some expected differences among the disciplines, but a surprising amount of agreement around core themes which are listed below.

1. Curation: The collection is more than content

A repeated concern expressed about digital content was that the traditional collection of books in a library has a variety of functions that are not fully replicated by delivery of the text within those books. The selection and, in some disciplines, even the physical size and format of a book can signal its value relative to other books that are not present or have not been produced to the same standards. Repeatedly it was noted that students (both undergraduates and graduates) do not have the skills of researching and evaluating materials. Traditionally shelved collections also provide opportunities for browsing and discovery of related materials that online access has not replicated. *A crucial role of a university library is to facilitate scholarly selection and assessment of materials. This may require new approaches, such as social recommendation systems (familiar from Amazon's "other people who bought this book also bought ..." feature) and an increased role in orienting and educating students to scholarly research.*

2. Academic values

Easy access to resources is critical for faculty in all disciplines. Faculty who have been on campus for many years notice a decline in the strength of the research collections. Faculty who are relatively new to campus notice a sharp difference between the University of Oregon and the campuses where they earned their degrees. The weaknesses in the collections were seen from a practical perspective. Faculty believe that it puts us at a competitive disadvantage and could be a retention issue. They were also seen from a values perspective. *Sufficient investments need to be made in the UO Libraries that are appropriate given our standing in the AAU. Current service levels must be maintained and/or improved.*

3. Space matters

While many faculty rely on the library's digital collections that can be accessed from anywhere, the physical space of the library is important to faculty. Perceived adequacy of the space varies widely. The branch libraries are inadequate in terms of space or in poor condition and in need of renovation and modernization. Overall, students are visiting the library space more than ever. Multiple comments noted the importance of providing physical spaces that both attract students and encourage use of the library as a place for focused scholarly work. *All libraries on campus need to provide attractive, comfortable physical spaces, furnished and maintained in a manner that distinguishes them from recreational and purely social spaces and encourages scholarly use.*

4. Time matters

Time is an extremely valuable resource for faculty. Two current frustrations are over-dependence on interlibrary loan to compensate for diminishing local collections, and technology that demands an investment of learning time for even simple everyday tasks. Workarounds for resource deficiencies are often "workable" at a cost in time, like an inter-library loan for an important book that should be in the UO collection, or making do with Blackboard idiosyncrasies because a more customized configuration would require more staff support. *Changes in library services need to enhance faculty and student productivity, not add to their workloads. Making a common task simpler and faster is as important as making a more complex task possible.*

5. Librarian partners.

Faculty recognize the important role that librarians play in curating the collection, helping faculty with their research, and teaching their students information research skills. The subject specialists are valued partners in the core academic mission. Faculty are concerned that reduced staffing in the library is having negative consequences, e.g., subject specialists covering too many disciplines, student assistants at reference desks, skeletal staffing for Blackboard. *Expert assistance is a critical component of a research library and must be a priority consideration.*

Values and Directions

Faculty focus group discussions were lively, even passionate beyond the expectations of the University Library Committee. A technological sea change is transforming but not lessening the role of a research library at the very heart of scholarship. Many of the changes visible to faculty in recent years have been make-do adjustments to cope with unstable and increasingly inadequate resources. There is a clear opportunity for UO Library to expand participation of faculty and students in setting directions and priorities, and a matching necessity for the University to provide adequate and predictable resources.

[6/6/11]