

# What is a Library? The Issue of Library Collections

Posted on [May 28, 2017](#)

<https://faulibrarydean.wordpress.com/2017/05/28/what-is-a-library-the-issue-of-library-collections/>



I have recently been approached by some faculty who believe that we are removing important items from our print collections and that this is evidence of a lack of support for faculty, for research, and for scholarship. I respect their concern and expect to be engaging in many more conversations about the changing nature of libraries and library collections in the near future. As I try to respond to their concerns, it makes me ponder the question of what a library is. Today, I want to focus on library collections.

Traditional dictionaries like Merriam Webster define a library as [“a place in which literary, musical, artistic, or reference materials \(such as books, manuscripts, recordings, or films\) are kept for use but not for sale.”](#) The Oxford English dictionary defines a library in similar fashion as [“A building or room containing collections of books, periodicals, and sometimes films and recorded music for use or borrowing by the public or members of an institution.”](#) There are some for whom this is the only valid definition of a library.

There are others who think (and have said to me since I’ve been Dean of University Libraries at FAU) that: “Since everything is available digitally, why do we need a library anymore?” If you do a Google search on the question [“do we still need libraries in the digital age?”](#) you will turn up link after link to articles from the New York Times, the Washington Post, PBS, the Guardian, the CBC, and many more that ponder this question, all with their own twist on the issue.

It is interesting to be standing in the middle of these two opposing views and trying to find a middle ground.

Unlike some of my colleagues or the popular press, I don’t foresee a day when the traditional definition of a library will be completely eliminated. I don’t believe that all knowledge, scholarship, or creative output will be available digitally anytime soon – or ever. I’m not even sure I would consider that desirable.

However, as the world’s scholarly output continues to increase, libraries are able to own or even provide direct access to a smaller and smaller percentage of it. [A 2014 posting on the Nature Newsblog](#) noted that “Bibliometric analysts Lutz Bornmann, at the Max Planck Society in Munich, Germany and Ruediger Mutz, at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich, think they have a better answer. It is impossible to know for

sure, but the real rate is closer to 8-9% each year, they argue. That equates to a doubling of global scientific output roughly every nine years.”

Libraries cannot hope to own or provide immediate electronic access to all the resources that their patrons want and need. Not only do we not have the funding to keep up with the world’s production of scholarly output, we also don’t have the space. Our collections budget are usually stagnant and not keeping up with the pace of inflation (as detailed in a April 2017 article from Library Journal on the [Periodicals Price Survey](#)) and there are new demands for the use of our space all the time. In the face of this new reality, libraries around the world are reviewing what it means to be a library.

The [Association of Research Libraries \(ARL\)](#) is an elite group of 123 research libraries in the U.S. and Canada. Membership in this elite group is hard to come by and, in earlier years, members could lose their standing and slip in the rankings if their total volume count decreased and if their budgets for collections were deemed to be inadequate. However, this traditional definition of a research library is being challenged, even within the ARL. In 2012, the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) commissioned an issue brief on [21<sup>st</sup> Century Collections](#). ARL has been moving away from its decades-old means of determining eligibility to join ARL that was based almost entirely on volume count and it is looking for new metrics that matched today’s research environment. A couple of phrases from that report have stayed with me: *“Twentieth-century research library collections were defined by local holdings, hailed as distinctive and vast. Twenty-first-century research library collections demand multiple strategies for ensuring broad access”* and *“As libraries transition from institution-centric collections to a user-centric networked world, distributed collections should grow correspondingly. Traditional practices cannot easily scale to support this new environment. Emphasizing the shift from paper to e-texts understates the change. Rather than focusing on acquiring the products of scholarship, the library is now an engaged agent supporting and embedded within the processes of scholarship.”*

To my mind, the **world** is everyone’s research library and we serve our faculty far better by assisting them in discovering and gaining timely access to the world’s scholarship rather than simply by holding onto specific journals or monographs. The ARL states on its [Collections site](#) that “Research collections are at the heart of the research library, but in the digital age the nature of information resources and library collections are undergoing profound transformations. New kinds of content, new formats and reformatting, new publishing models and access arrangements are rapidly reshaping research collections. As digital information resources increasingly predominate collecting, bringing new kinds of content within the research library’s sphere of responsibility, value propositions of traditional collections are altering apace.”

As far as our collections of published content are concerned, the FAU Libraries cannot be an archive or a museum. As reference and instruction librarian Joe Hardenbrook from Carroll University [wrote in 2014](#), “For most academic libraries, our mission is not to collect the whole of human knowledge. We have limited space, limited resources. We are not a warehouse for books—a warehouse is a storage facility. Books are for using—not for sitting on a shelf for years on end.”

In the realm of scholarly or creative output, at the FAU Libraries, we strive to:

- be a portal to the world’s scholarship, through providing immediate access to select, high-quality content in print and through [electronic subscriptions](#), as far as our funding and space permits.
- enable our students and faculty to gain access to much of the rest of the world’s scholarship and creative output through rapid and efficient [interlibrary loan](#).
- provide better awareness of, access to, and use of our distinctive [special collections](#).

- create local [digital collections](#) of unique materials that can be accessed anytime, anywhere.
- help our faculty and students create their own content and publish it in some form.

In this imperfect and rapidly changing world, the FAU Libraries will continue to select new materials; we will continue to deselect some materials to make room for new content or for other uses of the space (as explained in the LibGuide on our [Weeding Project](#)); we will continue to help our users find the information they need, create their own scholarship, collaborate in their study and research endeavors, work quietly on their own, explore the world of rare and unique materials, and be as successful as we can possibly help them to be.