

**Matthew Harrington**  
Collections Management Assistant  
Virginia Tech

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Topic: Under Pressure: Libraries Evolving to Thrive

### Reinventing the Academic Library

The academic library serves many functions, from acting as a gateway to scholarship to providing sanctuary from the chaos of campus life, but it is also both a transformative space and a space under constant transformation. In this sense, it both shapes and is shaped by the technologies of scholarship and the fluctuating trends in academia. As electronic sources continue to redefine the idea of library collections and the image of the library as an information warehouse erodes, reading rooms have transformed into information commons, issues of availability have been replaced with issues of access, and the gateway to scholarship has become virtual in the race to expand into the online world. However, published scholarship remains anchored in a very real financial world, and stagnant library budgets coupled with inflation have led to a more critical approach to managing both traditional print materials and online subscriptions in the electronic age. Libraries have had to adapt on several levels to the changing currents within academia and the various economic and technological spheres of scholarship.

For academic libraries to survive financially, subscription cancellations and diminished book budgets have been inevitable to some extent, but the process of choosing what to retain or purchase has become more complex, as well as more informed. Much has been written about large deselection projects at universities across the country, but the increasingly intricate formulae used to assign value to subscriptions are an ongoing trend. Qualitative approaches to value in the past have been based on the expertise of subject selectors, but to further justify difficult decisions, quantitative data has now become paramount to deselection projects, and libraries have a wealth of data to support those decisions. From usage data collected online, the library can track the most heavily used resources and popular areas for research to help allocate funding efficiently and more effectively than in the past. The library can also define and assign value in new, complex ways in order to get the most from the budget. Therefore, by necessity, the library as surrogate consumer for the university has become a smarter shopper.

As a result of collecting so much newly available data, the library has also become a better advocate for generating funds both within the university and beyond it. Just as data can justify the cancellation or purchase of a title, it can also justify the reallocation of finances to areas of need and can support revenue generating campaigns. As state support for higher education ebbs, fund-raising and development become critical components of the library and the university as a whole, and showing an illustrated demand for scholarship on campus is an indispensable instrument for gaining more funding, which ties into the public image of the library and its role within the academic community.

The library can no longer assume its importance; it must now constantly demonstrate and reinforce its role as one of necessity if it is to thrive. For this reason, outreach has become essential, and

many libraries now have a designated outreach librarian to take charge of public relations. In attempts to draw greater numbers of visitors and consequently place the library at the hub of student life, libraries have taken on roles previously housed within student centers. On some campuses, the library and student center have even merged. This trend is again related to the academic library's need to have greater visibility when university budgets are allocated.

The changes prompting a reinvention of the academic library are not all economic, though. The nature of scholarship has changed, as well. The lengthy treatise striving to become the seminal work on a subject has almost vanished, as notions of disciplinary divides become blurred. As a result, a preponderance of new journals has emerged from the margins of traditional disciplines over the past few decades, which indicates a transformation within the university as well. And just as new programs that question traditional paradigms within academic departments turn the scholarly canon upside down and redefine the nature of academic inquiry, new media and new forms of scholarly discourse turn the traditional library collection upside down and reinvent the academic library. What remains is a library with the majority of its collection accessible by computer, and the isolated scholar in the stacks has become a relic of the past as collaborative learning, online portals to scholarship, and interdisciplinary projects take a firmer foothold in the academy, as well as in the library's role in fostering scholarship.

Economic woes aside, the recent changes occurring within academic libraries have placed them in a challenging yet exciting role within the university. Despite the imperative to take on a difficult fiscal responsibility in collections management, libraries have evolved into energetic centers for scholarly activity, and as new resources become available, academic libraries are now better equipped to integrate those into university life with a technological savvy and sense of youthful exuberance to match that of incoming students.