

# The Higher Education Environment and the Role of the Academic Library

*John W. Shumaker*

## **Higher Education and University Libraries Today**

It is a pleasure to address the ACRL membership. You are pivotal in supporting and ensuring fulfillment of higher education's mission in today's information intensive world. You have always known and appreciated the pleasures and challenges of research, teaching, and learning, and of generously sharing your knowledge with students and faculty. I know this as a scholar and teacher. I appreciate and have always depended on the libraries and librarians of the world in my work.

Now you and I are working in the higher education world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where a new set of realities and opportunities influence our work as educators. Today I want to share with you with some thoughts on predominant challenges that we face and how they affect your work, which is so critical to the success of our faculty, students, and the community at large. You are all quite familiar with these issues. It is, however, useful and perhaps even therapeutic for us to think about them together as colleagues and professionals. Let us consider them first as they affect all of higher education. Then we can

focus on their impact on college and university libraries.

Our first challenge is to embrace a "students first" philosophy.

As unorthodox as it might sound, it is true that our colleges and universities exist to serve students. They do not exist primarily to serve the professional interests of the faculty, although those interests are vitally important to the quality of education our students receive. Nor do universities exist primarily to advance the professional interests of staff or administration, although our work is vital to the success of the faculty's work with our students. And, most of us represent institutions that have a strong and defining commitment to research—but we are not research institutes, we are universities that exist to serve students.

This reminder of our basic purpose might seem to you to be unnecessary at best or a vacuous presidential platitude at worst. But it is interesting to me how often we forget this basic responsibility in our planning and daily operations as we manage today's complex "multi-universities." Many of us remember the days when it was at an informal badge of honor

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for colleges and public universities (at least) to point with barely concealed pride to low retention rates as a sign of academic rigor and quality. Yet today our state legislators, coordinating boards, and communities expect us to help our students to succeed—to persist to graduation and to become productive members of a highly skilled workforce. A dropout represents perhaps the inability of a student to cope with university-level work, but it also represents a failure of the institution and the educational system—as well as a lost opportunity to add value to a life and to our society.

This public mandate for increased retention and graduation rates is a new paradigm for many large public research universities. It leads us to become more selective in admitting new students to our freshman class, to divest ourselves of remedial and development education, and to direct that work to community colleges. It leads us to focus more closely on the factors that enhance academic quality such as class size, advising systems, the strength of our honors programs, the involvement of full-time faculty in teaching undergraduates, our technology infrastructure, and the quality of our facilities. It also leads us to adopt a more customer-oriented or “customer-service” orientation to dealing with our students.

But we have a long way to go in reorienting our policies, practices, and system back to student services. In this regard our public institutions have much to learn from our colleagues in private institutions. Our future success in satisfying the demands of the public for greater accountability will depend in large measure upon our commitment to “putting students first” and helping them to succeed.

Our second challenge is to become more accountable.

This issue is particularly true for state universities, whose budgets depend in large part on the good will of legislators and the many publics they represent. It is also true for private universities that are now experiencing increased scrutiny and criticism from trustees and donors who want to know in greater and sometimes painful detail how their dollars are being used and whether they are being used efficiently.

Never has this issue of accountability been more to the fore than in the current economic climate. As states and donors tighten their belts and look for new ways to cut spending, colleges and universities appear as likely targets. This is especially true since unlike

most state agencies, we have a supplemental revenue source to turn to—our students.

For decades, university presidents and faculty have resisted the idea that we had to demonstrate our effectiveness to show results. Those days are long gone. Today we must be willing to show a concrete return on investment. Of course we cannot measure everything that goes on at a university. We can't quantify the impact on a student of an idea, the insight that results from the intense interaction and debate of a seminar, or a sudden light of understanding that clicks on during a quiet period of study in our library. But there are things that we can reasonably and accurately measure.

At the University of Tennessee, for example, we have developed a set of strategic objectives and a specific way of measuring our progress towards measurable institutional goals. I will tell you more about our approach to scorecard management a bit later.

Third, we should never lose sight of the overriding importance of public agenda.

Ever since I entered university life as a young assistant professor of Classics in 1969, our institutions of higher education have been challenged to demonstrate their “relevance.” Early in my career I bristled at this preoccupation. I thought our “relevance” was self-evident to any thoughtful person. But after more than 15 years as a university president, I have come to understand the critical importance of demonstrating how our work is relevant to the public interest. The agenda for the University of Tennessee and for any other public university must be closely linked to—and actively supportive of—a long-term economic, cultural, and social agenda of the state from which we draw our support. I know that many of you are in private institutions, but the linkage to a community agenda is as important to you as it is to those of us in public institutions. In this regard, we no longer have the luxury of following our own individual or institutional muse. We must be fiercely focused and passionate about our core mission and values as academic institutions, but we cannot ignore our responsibility for improving the lives of those around us, especially our students, but certainly also the citizens whose resources support us.

We can all agree that we best serve the public interest when we focus on our students and serve them well. But beyond that defining commitment, we all know that colleges and universities add millions to

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the local and national economies in a variety of ways. We invest money and activity in research and development ventures. That helps our students by involving them directly in the process of discovery—and we should do more. Our institutions have to be recognized as constructive, thoughtful, and congenial partners with local, state, and federal governments and the private sector as we help to solve chronic and complex problems that confront society. We must engage actively with our colleagues in primary and secondary education, business, and government to contribute to the public good. That helps us serve our students by helping them bridge the gap between theory and practice. It also reflects our responsibility for putting knowledge to work for this improvement of the quality of life for all citizens. In Tennessee, we would be thrilled if we could say we contributed in some way to raising the average personal income by 1% by linking our vision with priorities that are critical to the future of our states, nation, and the world.

Fourth, institutional cooperation must be our automatic approach to our business.

Our credibility and effectiveness with our donors (whether state legislators or individual or corporate donors) has become seriously diluted by our tendency to let the competitive energy that drives our athletic programs infect the way in which we conduct our academic business with other colleges and universities. We can point to thousands of successful collaborative ventures across the nation in large scale research projects—like UT's exciting partnership with Battelle to manage the Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee, the friendly collaboration between The University of Louisville and The University of Kentucky in urban planning and medical research, or the pathbreaking work of institutions involved in the Research Triangle. But many of us also know of instances of cutthroat competition far below these lofty examples of success—especially as state budgets become tighter and university administrators, faculty, local legislators, and even alumni skirmish with each other for any advantage that will lead to more students, more recognition, higher rankings and more public acclaim. But our publics are losing confidence in us as we scramble indecorously to gain institutional advantage at someone else's expense. I argue that we can achieve far more in pursuit of our goals and the public agenda if we strive heroically to cooperate and collaborate with

each other. I suggest that we embrace the paradox that we shall serve our institutions' long-term interests best if we are prepared to subordinate our selfish institutional interests to the public agenda and work more closely together as partners in the public interest.

The fifth challenge concerns entrepreneurial energy.

In this regard we face an interesting historical paradox. The culture, ideas, and traditions of the modern university are, as you all know, deeply rooted in the culture of the medieval church. The inherent conservatism that emerges from our ecclesiastical roots has served us well for centuries in our role as guardian of our heritage and preserver and transmitter of knowledge. But that medieval *ethos* was not known for its abundance of entrepreneurial energy. Yet the modern university, beginning with the federal government's interest in scientific research and development in the years following World War II, has become increasingly entrepreneurial—a trend accelerated by periodic, if not chronic, fiscal difficulties which have confronted overextended state governments since at least the early 1970s and compelled us to be creative in developing new sources of revenue.

Our conservative institutional traditions often conflict with our recent impulses to become more creative and less risk-averse. How many times have you come up with a wonderful idea for improving your library or your university only to be told it can't be done? Or shouldn't be done? Or that "they will never let us do that"? It is now clear, despite this chronic institutional schizophrenia, that our entrepreneurial skills must continue to develop if we are to thrive. So I believe that we have to be creative, resourceful, nimble, and flexible in all aspects of our institutions. We have to reduce bureaucracy, liberate our processes and systems of oversight from their essentially medieval roots, and eliminate impediments to making our universities better places to study and work. We must encourage our faculty and administrative colleagues to take reasonable risks, to learn from failure, and to be zealous in identifying new ways for us to make our colleges and universities better. My job as a university president has many facets and responsibilities. But my primary task is to create an environment and support system that empowers bright, talented, creative, and energetic people to spread their wings and soar, to

*April 10–13, 2003, Charlotte, North Carolina*

not only think “outside the box”; but to question whether any “box” even exists.

I have identified five of the many challenges that face us as educators today. There are many more of course; but let us focus on those five as they affect our libraries—and celebrate the many ways that you have pointed the way to success for university presidents and policy makers.

### **A Focus on Students**

We are scholars, yes, but first and foremost we are responsible for ensuring that our students are engaged in the best possible educational experience. We must constantly remind ourselves that we exist to serve our students. I often point out that all public universities must treat every incoming student as though he or she is potentially the largest individual donor in the history of the university (our colleagues in private colleges and universities learned that lesson decades ago!) At this time in their lives they should realize that they have many more people around them totally committed to their success than they ever will again. You and your libraries play a huge part in this and yet it is a challenge to our traditional image of the academic library.

Let me give you some examples. The library as place is changing dramatically. It is no longer a quiet museum-like container of books and lovely study spaces. Your libraries and ours at Tennessee contain lively and even noisy spaces. Coffee houses, auditoria, media labs, and help desks add to the stacks and the carrels. More importantly, hundreds of students are also filling the multitude of spaces you are now providing. They are interacting with faculty, librarians, and each other. At Tennessee our gate count is up by about 6%. One could attribute this simply to the Starbucks Café, but book circulation is also up indicating increases in the actual usage of library materials. Welcoming spaces encourage students to use our libraries. The library can be a salon space providing a positive social and cultural venue for all. This role is more important than ever in an age where solitary work in one’s home or dorm room can overwhelm and isolate today’s students.

Being student centered also means treating students with respect and dignity. Here you play the leadership role on most campuses with your exemplary service philosophy. Other offices and departments can

learn from you, but I encourage you to strive for even higher standards of service. You help to insure that students have a positive experience, good role models, and a reliable source of academic assistance.

Being student centered means building an effective virtual space to extend the traditional physical space of the library. The student centered digital library contains easy-to-navigate content as well as services for that content. I know this aspect of our academic libraries is evolving rapidly and I urge you to keep the student first in your plans and designs.

### **A Focus on Faculty and Staff**

The faculty and staff are the primary resource for serving our students well. The academic library has always had more of a faculty-centered focus. This fact is not surprising, considering the library’s faculty emphasis on collections and research. But faculty are like students in their changing uses and information needs. New generations of faculty have different expectations and veteran faculty sometimes long for the traditional, the familiar library they consider a fundamental part of the life of the mind. These visions sometimes clash. Dialogue and flexibility in addressing the various needs of the campus community is a must.

The changing culture of higher education demands a high degree of accountability and productivity from faculty, so it is inevitable that they challenge our libraries to support their research and teaching needs in more effective ways. Increased research productivity and quality as a major goal of universities requires that faculty have access to research materials as quickly as possible in an environment of limited resources. Faculty, as well as students, need inspiring spaces to do their work. For example, at Tennessee we have a service called Library Express which delivers materials physically and electronically to faculty and graduate student offices. Streamlining bureaucracy for our hardworking faculty and staff should be another goal. Removing the bureaucratic underbrush, even in our libraries, should be an essential activity for us all.

Fostering competitive pay for faculty and students is another area of importance. Typically, our libraries employ larger numbers of staff and especially student assistants so you can do a lot to bring this important issue to the fore on your campus. I know that librarians do many salary surveys and these data should be

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brought to the attention of your administrators to determine short and long term solutions to pay concerns. Of course adequate compensation, combined with a collegial and positive environment, are key to recruitment and retention.

### **Accountability**

Higher education must be accountable to its students, funders, supporters, and the public at large. The University of Tennessee received more than \$405 million from the State of Tennessee this fiscal year and another \$217 million comes from our 42,000 students in the form of tuition. Combined, these figures represent two-thirds of the University's 1.2 billion dollar budget. These funds are not merely state appropriations or revenue. Rather, they are investments. Our students and taxpayers can get frequent updates on the results of their investments by viewing what is likely the most comprehensive quality tracking effort of any college or university, the scorecard I mentioned earlier. We have identified 50 critical measures of quality and institutional effectiveness and, using 2001 as a baseline, have projected what our university and university system must look like in 2010. I urge you to visit <http://scorecard.tennessee.edu> to study these measures. They are specific, they are meaningful, and they are public for all to see. We hope it will give our entire university, as well as our donors, alumni, and Legislature greater confidence that the University of Tennessee is not reluctant to measure its success. Our colleges, libraries, and other units must tie their budget needs to such a scorecard as well.

You all receive significant annual investments from the sources I mentioned above and have to be rigorously accountable for their use. I am also aware of the continuing developments in assessment of library programs, collections, and initiatives in the academic library community and I applaud your efforts. I also urge you to keep a sharp focus on your institution's strategic priorities and be able to articulate your efforts and the results you achieve in this context.

### **Collaboration and the Public Agenda**

Collaboration between libraries within states and regions is a key way to make the most of our precious resources. I know that you are working in innovative ways to make the most of your collective expertise and resources. I urge you to ratchet up this collabora-

tion to its highest gear. In Kentucky we were proud of the creation of the Kentucky virtual library. At the University of Tennessee, the Provost, the library, and the faculty came together last fall for a symposium, Scholarly Publishing and the Common Good: Changing Our Culture, to discuss issues and possible strategies. One specific way to address the crisis is by helping the faculty regain control of the scholarly communication system – a system that should exist chiefly for them, their students, their colleagues, and their constituencies rather than for the commercial gain of publishers.

Collaboration between librarians and others on campus is increasingly important to advancing campus-wide initiatives which require collective expertise from the library, academic departments or IT staff. We have, for example, a unique collaborative department called the Digital Media Service, which is staffed with people from our information technology department but planned and run jointly by librarians and IT personnel. Digital library efforts which comprehensively embrace campus scholarly content should be the norm. More important, our libraries can lead the way to aligning our academic resources to the public agenda. Your traditional commitment to making knowledge accessible and useful to our public in this digital age is a crucial ingredient in economic and community development. You have set an example in your collaborative outreach efforts that the rest of the university should emulate.

### **Entrepreneurship**

A robust research enterprise is an essential component of the university of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Faculty at smaller institutions are also engaged in research and creative activity important to the community at large. Certainly at public institutions research is an effective way to enhance a state's economic development by attracting more grant dollars, producing more spin-off businesses and creating better paying jobs. In the case of the University of Tennessee, many of the ingredients for successes are already present. We have substantial ties to Oak Ridge National Laboratory because of our joint management of the world-class facility with Battelle Memorial Institute. The University of Tennessee Health Science Center in Memphis is a key partner in emerging biotechnology initiatives, and the University of Tennessee's Space In-

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stitute in Tullahoma has long-standing ties to the Arnold Engineering Development Center. Access to your collective resources and expertise is an essential component to the success of these examples.

Obviously strong research collections represented by your libraries are essential components. In many disciplines such as my own, Classics, the library and its collections are my laboratory. I challenge you to be more entrepreneurial in supporting research in all areas, seeking creative solutions to provide scholarly content and service to individual faculty, research centers, and others aligned with the increasingly collaborative research models which know no physical boundaries.

Strong digital libraries, requiring you to participate collectively in and support your own research agendas, are also a must in this new environment. Innovative services with greater attention to the lab culture and to non-traditional participants are also essential. Primary clientele for academic institutions engaged in global research enterprises must be redefined. Playing a leadership role in disseminating the research results of your institution is another aspect of this theme. I know that many of you are involved

in developing institutional repositories and web portals with a goal of promoting broader access and dissemination of your campuses' research outcomes. In addition to contributing to the research and scholarly community at large, these efforts will also become important marketing tools in highlighting practical outcomes of research for our institutions.

Academic libraries are the intellectual heart and soul of colleges and universities. Your efforts, your choices, and your vision are crucial to academic freedom. You are the vanguard of those who advance higher education to meet the challenges of a changing and increasingly technological world, but you play an equally vital role as providers of information and knowledge for the public good.

In these opening years of a new century, we in higher education are challenged as never before to demonstrate our relevance and to justify the confidence placed in us by students and by all who fund our work. Our libraries provide eloquent testimony of our commitment to serious study, the encouragement of diversity and the free exchange of ideas, and a research environment which fosters discovery.