

Collaborate to Innovate

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The next decade holds great promise for the creation of cooperative solutions to facilitate collaborative research and create a seamless user experience online. I hope to see a future in which libraries continue to stretch themselves beyond their traditional role as gatekeepers of knowledge, building spaces, systems, and services that facilitate research within their users' existing research flows. A lack of cooperation among institutions, however, is going to be major barrier to change. The changes discussed in this essay are only possible if libraries and vendors can collaborate to create solutions that cut across institutional and proprietary boundaries. Focusing on our individual institutions alone will only result in building more silos. Through collaboration, libraries can create powerful change that will improve our users' research experience and increase our overall relevance.

While libraries have always been focused on assessing their services, we should see an increased focus on understanding how students and faculty conduct research and on inserting ourselves into their research flows. Ethnographic research, like that conducted at the University of Rochester and MIT, gives libraries a valuable picture of the process users go through in their research and how they use library and outside resources. Since every library has a unique user population that interacts with different resources and institutions, all libraries will need to conduct their own research to understand their populations. Once we better understand how our users conduct research, we will begin to design systems and services that meet our users where they are and function within their existing workflows. This will result in a decreased need for teaching students how to use our systems in library instruction and a greater emphasis on teaching students how to critically evaluate and use the resources available to them.

Academic work is inherently social and libraries will focus more on enabling collaborative work, both in our physical spaces and online. Over the past decade, we have seen a greater emphasis being placed on supporting collaborative work in the way we design library spaces. Since most libraries built in the previous century simply were not designed to facilitate group study and research, many have been, and will continue to be, renovated to include information commons with flexible spaces for students to collaborate around computers. However, I think we will start to see increasing push-back from those users who want the library to remain a traditional quiet space where they can easily browse the stacks (just this past year, students at Syracuse University protested library plans to remove less-used books to a storage building so that they could make more room for collaborative spaces). Libraries will need to find a balance between supporting solitary and collaborative research, as both will continue to be important components of the academic endeavor.

In addition to developing physical spaces for collaborative research, libraries will build capacity for collaborative work online. These days, most web-savvy researchers utilize a variety of research tools in their workflow—some from the traditional academic world and some from the world of social media. So much knowledge these days is being created and shared online using tools like wikis, blogs, and social bookmarking services, because libraries offer no facility for collecting and annotating library resources and web resources in a single space or for sharing ideas with colleagues. Library systems must grow to be more than just spaces for our users to find resources; they should facilitate the entire research process. Libraries and vendors will increasingly work to develop systems that integrate with or include the social features users need to collect and annotate their research and build knowledge collaboratively, accomplishing in real-time what once took years.

This capacity-building for collaborative work must happen beyond the individual library. Scholarly research is not limited by institutional boundaries, so our solutions will need to be developed beyond the institutional level. Tools like PennTags (at the University of Pennsylvania) and MTagger (at the University of Michigan) are exciting in their use of social media to facilitate research, but because they are limited to members of the

institution, they have limited value for scholars working with outside collaborators. Cooperation is also critical because the value of any social technology is governed by the “network effect:” i.e., the suggestion that a resource is valuable in proportion to the number of people using it. If social features are going to be built into our library systems, they will need to aggregate annotations and other social content across institutions. Creating a virtual research environment for scholars is going to require much greater cooperation across libraries and also with our vendors.

Libraries will also work to better integrate library resources and services into the Learning Management System (LMS). A *Campus Technology* report indicates that by 2014, the majority of U.S. students will be taking some courses online. If the LMS is essentially our students’ virtual campus, we need to make sure that accessing and using library resources is as seamless in that space as it is on the physical campus. Right now, because of the difficulty of integrating library resources into the LMS at some institutions, faculty members choose to use resources found on the Web for their classes. At most academic institutions, student authentication into the LMS has no connection to library authentication, forcing students to login at least twice, often with different usernames and passwords. Librarians must start to take on a greater role in working with academic computing units and LMS vendors to ensure a seamless user experience with library resources and services.

Collaboration is the critical catalyst that will push libraries forward over the next decade. For libraries to create positive change in the resource-constrained environments in which we now operate (and will likely operate in the future), we will need to work together to build solutions that facilitate the sort of academic work our users need and want to do.