

“Slacker Libraries: Is our past, our future?”

By Thomas C. Leonard

Universities are as proud of their libraries as parents are of their children, and in telling how they grew, usually skip over the times that they were not doing much, or doing things badly.

The founding president of the University of Chicago, William Rainey Harper, called attention to library delinquency as he organized this great research center in Hyde Park. He had learned from a librarian across town, William Frederick Poole at the Newberry, that when Poole went to Yale in the 1840s, the students never looked at a book that was not a textbook. Harper, a great linguist and also a Yale man, recalled the library ca. 1880 at “even the oldest” universities: “So far as it had location, it was the place to which the professor was accustomed to make his way occasionally, the student almost never. It was open for consultation during perhaps one hour a day on three days a week. . . . The librarian—there was none. Why should there have been?”

Great public universities of the nineteenth century also harbored slacker libraries. The famous journalist Lincoln Steffens said that he was about the only Berkeley student in his class here in the 1870s to walk into the handsome building and to use the books.

The minor role for libraries stemmed from curriculum and not character. Teaching was by rote and experimental research was rare, even by the faculty. In any case, the social sciences and humanities had barely emerged from our universities’ oldest mission, to train professionals for law, medicine, and religions. Labs, President Harper recalled, were no more vital parts of traditional universities than were libraries.

As anyone can tell from a walk across our campuses, this changed at the turn of the twentieth century, with labs and libraries in an arms race to dominate the space for learning. Symbolically, if not financially, libraries won. Campus libraries sit at the center of things, adorned with the names of the great chancellors and presidents who loved them: Harper at Chicago, Jordan at Stanford, Alderman at Virginia, Thompson at Ohio State, Butler at Columbia, Hatcher at Michigan, Eisenhower at Johns Hopkins, Wilson at Minnesota, Hesburg at Notre Dame, Young at UCLA, Gardner at Berkeley, and the list could easily be extended. All of us want this past of growth and vitality to be our future, but might we wind up with a future that is closer to the formative decades of many universities, the library as an ornament, just sitting there?

There is one current taking us back to this point, but other trends that might expand on what was gained in the twentieth century.

Higher education costs have outstripped the willingness of most states and many families to pay them. The main effort underway to bring costs into line addresses

“administrative bloat.” In the eyes of consultants such as Bain & Co. (currently working with the University of North Carolina, Cornell, and Berkeley) costs can be wrung out by automating jobs now done by people and by reducing transactions that require face-to-face contact. Bain & Co. seems to like what it has seen so far in how libraries are run because of our early use of software systems and consortial activity that is in advance of other units on campus. But libraries continue to be labor intensive, measured against how private companies staff services.

We have people on site, not at call centers in low-wage states or foreign countries, for instance. Berkeley, counting student employees, still has a thousand people working in libraries, even after a cut of 20 to 25% in these budgets. Our challenge is to see that these people are deployed strategically so that we do not slip back to the days when libraries had collections that were ignored and wisdom that few people tapped.

Numbers do have new meaning, now that we have seen how many people are required to run Craigslist (about 30) and the key services to scholars from Google (a much smaller number). This is why some university work is bound to change radically. Academic advising, for instance seems likely to be turned over to smart web sites and social networks. These are not bad outcomes for some of the work that libraries now do. In handling circulation queries, for instance, we have empowered users and liberated staff.

If our head count makes us vulnerable, it also may be our hidden strength. Administrative bloat is not the real flaw of the academy, fragmentation is. Bain & Co. seems to grasp this. Letting units that are large enough to be efficient handle work that is now spread out in many small places is the way forward. Centers of excellence can compete in offering these services, avoiding the centralization that often produces a service that pleases few as it is rolled out, and eventually no one as it grows into a monopoly. Libraries know a great deal about hiring and inspiring student workers, why shouldn't we handle this for a range of programs that depend on students? And we should be ready to compete with other units who have this capacity.

The twentieth century research university was not born because its leaders were infallible and times were flush. Many of the ideas of President Harper's generation went nowhere. These institutions grew through economic storms of the 1890s and 1930s as well as through two world wars that froze enrollment during mobilization. The great libraries and their schools fit a nation on the move in science, with a cultural churn from near constant migrations internally to places of learning in cities and, with some interruption, new people coming to the U.S. and Canada. Business, cultural, and political interests now were global, and libraries were places one had to be to have a say on how this would turn out. The empty rooms and neglected stacks that President Harper recalled were transformed with this energy. To match that success, research libraries will have to become the spiritual home for all that remains vital in traditional fields as well as in new ones.

To shape us up administratively, Bain & Co. offers ten-color organizational charts with hundreds of little boxes to show spaces for improvement. Absent the millions of dollars for such studies, we might proceed on the cheap, by simply listening to what our users talk about. How we address fields that buzz with “geo” and “nano” and “bio” and “ethno”—as well as “smart” and “synthetic” and “computational” and “virtual” will tell us more about our fate than what Bain & Co. says about us.

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