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Cover Page Footnote

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Compelling and Sustainable: A Response to Todd C. Ream's "For Or Unto Me?: Explorations of the Formative Potential of Libraries"



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Todd Ream's essay in this journal issue offers a compelling vision of the role of libraries in higher education – a vision with the potential not only to help librarians demonstrate the value of our libraries to administrators but also to guide us as we make difficult decisions regarding our spaces, collections, services, and staffing.

As a non-librarian faculty member, Ream offers librarians the gift of perspective. At a time when change is sweeping our libraries and the communities that we serve, he draws our attention to the formative value that libraries have on those who use them. He argues that "the physical spaces, the collections, and the staffs that define libraries are critical to the cultivation of intellectual humility, human flourishing, and thus the health and well-being of Christian institutions of higher education" (p. 94). However intrinsic this experience may be, our libraries would benefit by making it explicit: becoming more intentional in our efforts to foster intellectual humility. To do so, we need a framework for ordering our thoughts on how Ream's vision might impact our daily operations.

Although Ream makes a compelling case for libraries, as a non-librarian he lacks the experience to strongly connect that to the practical operations of libraries – especially of cash strapped libraries. Rather he leaves the application of his work to the imagination of his librarian audiences. This article is intended to continue the conversation by exploring what it might look like to shape a library around the formative goal of cultivating intellectual humility in the face of fiscal constraints.

The Practicality of Purpose

Even as the daily demands of our profession so easily consume our attention, Ream invites us to explore the big picture of what and why and how libraries exist, as he builds his thesis that "the formative potential of libraries resides in their ability to cultivate intellectual humility" (p. 82). Intellectual humility requires individuals both to engage with what can be known and to appreciate the limits of their own knowledge. Drawing upon the theme of 1 Corinthians 13:12, Ream argues, "Libraries are crucial sites of formation by which individuals come to appreciate that not only do they see, but also that they see dimly this side of eternity" (p. 94). Libraries are uniquely positioned to advance an appreciation for both the vast tome of human learning as well as an awareness of the limits of such knowledge.

Such a discussion of grand ideals may feel hopelessly out of place for hard-working librarians in under-resourced libraries. And yet Ream's vision can indeed offer a course of action as we navigate the turbulent waters of change, including those driven by massive budget cuts that some librarians presently face. After all, intellectual humility has a natural connection with many things we already speak of as values: information literacy, preservation of knowledge, and access to information, to name a few. A clear sense of purpose equips those of us on the ground to face operational questions.

Continuing the Conversation: Re-Imagining Our Libraries

What would our libraries actually look like if we embraced the practice of intellectual humility as a primary mission? Given such a formative vision, what physical spaces, collections and staff would be needed? How could library leaders, including those experiencing resource reductions, faithfully apply this model to scale in various library operations?

These are difficult questions with difficult answers highly dependent upon unique institutional contexts. What follows is an attempt to show how Ream's vision might inform our conversations around spaces, collections, staff, and services.

Formative Spaces

If we are focused on cultivating intellectual humility, we may feel less pressure for our libraries to look like the latest Steelcase catalog. After all, intellectual humility is not antithetical with weary furniture worn down by previous learners expanding their horizons (or perhaps facing their own limitations in such endeavors). Nor is there, in fact, a square footage requirement. As adaptable as this formative vision may be, it requires intentionality on the part of library staff in how we talk about our space, designate quiet and collaborative areas, create displays or wall posters, provide signage, etc.

What physical spaces foster intellectual humility? How do our spaces instill awe, respect, and curiosity within our patrons as they discover our resources? Do our quiet study spaces provide a context for deep engagement with unfamiliar ideas? Do our collaborative spaces invite our patrons to reach beyond their personal limitations to engage others in the learning process – an example which Ream notes as a practice of cultivating intellectual humility (p. 94).

Although Ream focused on physical spaces in libraries, our patrons increasingly enter our virtual spaces – perhaps with even greater need for the library to provide formative structure. Do our proxy servers and online library presence welcome learners into virtual spaces that encourage the exploration of knowledge while also helping them process their own limitations as learners? How frequently do we evaluate and improve the online user experience for our patrons with formative goals in mind? The mission of fostering intellectual humility in each patron offers a new and empowering way to engage how we think about both our physical and virtual space.

Formative Collections

Ream asks librarians, “How often, for example, do you evaluate the collection you curate to determine whether it points individuals to the fact that they see but that they also see dimly?” (p. 94). While acknowledging that librarians use additional criteria, Ream argues that fostering intellectual humility should nonetheless be one of the criteria used in expanding and weeding collections (p. 95). This may necessitate expanding the diversity of viewpoints and experiences contained within our collections or even guide a rigorous weeding project as we accept that our library shelves cannot contain everything that could be known. Further, the very act of reaching out to other learning communities to obtain additional materials through an interlibrary loan service can itself serve as a reminder of both the limitations of our knowledge and the grace that comes through collaborative learning.

Beyond simply questions about content, the goal of fostering intellectual humility should also inform questions about discoverability. Intentionality is required for our collections to be easily discoverable – showing both how easy it can be to identify needed information while also exposing students to the vast scope of human knowledge. As librarians, we know this work requires cataloging, integrated library systems, discovery platforms, databases, collection development policies, LibGuides, and more – all of which can be held up to Ream’s formative lens.

Formative Staff (and what that means for services)

Ream provides examples of how librarians themselves serve to foster intellectual humility. In Part IV of his essay, he highlights the role of welcoming incoming students into the library and the community of learning that it represents (p. 95);

helping disillusioned students keep hold of the fact that knowledge can still be acquired, even if in part (p. 95); and working with faculty to integrate specialized knowledge with other subject areas (p. 95). Do librarians intentionally focus on formation, embracing roles as mentor, guide, and sage on the journey of deepening intellectual humility?

Faith-based institutions of higher-learning have the added ability to explore the related realm of spiritual formation in an intentional process of cultivating intellectual humility. In many such contexts, librarians serve as informal chaplains on their campuses helping students navigate the hurdles encountered during the formation process (the breaking down and loss of the known that is intrinsic to the formation of humility, but that can so easily lead to a crisis of faith that must be navigated).

Here, too, Ream's perspective proves helpful for library decision makers. He elevates staffing over services, drawing attention to spaces, collections, and staff without creating an explicit category for services. Of course, few within librarianship would argue that library services are of more value than the staff who make such services possible. And yet, many libraries carefully create staffing positions to support specific library services. Ream's framework offers libraries a different strategy for justifying and defining staff positions, and adapting to changes in staffing levels (whether increases or decreases) by focusing on formative potential offered rather than services performed.

Yet his vision can inform our service decisions as well. How well (or poorly) do current library services foster intellectual humility? What improvements could we make to better foster intellectual humility? How would budgets shift? What services might disappear altogether and be replaced by something very different?

However one approaches the questions of staffing and services, Ream's framework offers surprising flexibility as a library built around a formative vision could more easily scale to fit a new funding level than a more traditional library which prioritizes existing services (and correspondingly rigid job descriptions) over outcomes.

Scalability & Sustainability

Ream's thesis offers its greatest value when it comes to the hardest questions librarians face: the need for an administrator to say "yes" or "no" to programs, acquisitions, staff hires or staff cuts in the face of limited resources. Intellectual humility provides a framework for weighing options in a manner that transcends the merely pragmatic or expedient.

Granted, Ream does not set out to address resource allocation. Nowhere does he even suggest that libraries need a change (whether an increase or a decrease) in library

resources in order to cultivate intellectual humility. But many library administrators face the reality of resource constraints daily. How do we do that in a way that isn't just triage? Intentionally pursuing a formative goal is paramount. The questions of how best to steward library resources can be more strategically tackled once the compelling vision for a library has been clearly established.

Conclusion

Ream proposes a compelling response to the questions of library value and purpose that are presently consuming the vast majority of library administrators. Yet working out the operational details, unique to each institutional setting, requires considerable effort. An enduring value of Ream's vision of the library as formative to intellectual humility is that it applies to a small library staffed by one librarian as well as it does a complex library operation with significant staffing and collections. We do well to remember the formative contribution that our profession has had and not lose sight of the vital work of fostering intellectual humility as we continue to reimagine our spaces, collections, and staffing. Ream's essay concludes with a call for librarians to respond. This is one such response. More are needed. †

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WORK CITED

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