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The Future of Libraries



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ABSTRACT

Prompted by the article by Dan Cohen (2019), this essay will explore the possibilities of reversing the trend that Dr. Cohen presented and offer a solution that turned the library statistics of one library around dramatically. To change the habits of patron usage, faculty will need to work with the library to make it happen.

Introduction

“What is the future of libraries?” or some variation of that theme is one of the questions frequently asked of candidates for library positions during the interview process. It is expected that the candidate has spent a tremendous amount of time thinking about the future of libraries and the profession, formulating some opinion and perhaps even a vision of something new.

It was just such a question presented to me, when being interviewed for a library position at Southeastern Bible College, that began me working on a plan to build the library collection with the support of the administration and faculty approval. Knowing that changing the current procedure would take time, I began to envision the steps that would be necessary to bring the desired results.

Not having witnessed my vision in reality, I thought it wise to engage in conversation with fellow librarians to get their opinions and critiques. Attending the annual conferences of the Association of Christian Librarians allowed me the opportunity to share my ideas with fellow librarians. With a clearer picture of what I needed to do, I was ready to begin the process of building the library.

Gaining Approval

Changing the way patrons use the library can be difficult. Knowing that change can sometimes involve money, the plan envisioned needed to consider fiduciary matters as well as lifestyle habits in order to be successful. Bearing this in mind, I went to the Provost to present my plan and to gain her approval.

The first step in the plan was for the library to receive a copy of every course syllabus. From the syllabus, any books or journals listed would be considered for

purchase by the library. A new library assessment goal emerged from this process where the faculty were promised that 80% of any materials listed in syllabi would be in the library collection.

The Provost realized that implementing this new standard would mean that syllabi should include a bibliography. She then required all faculty to start including an up-to-date list of sources in their syllabi. As well, the library's budget for books was increased each year slightly and was always left untouched when budget cuts were made.

After talking with the Provost, I made appointments with every faculty member that I could. I wanted to gain their friendship and find out what areas of interest they studied. I wanted to assure them that the library was not just for students but that they should supply me with materials that piqued their interest. I also wanted to know what publisher catalogs they received and if they would send me information about materials they would recommend from those catalogs.

Early Years

Not every professor required a research component for their class. Getting those professors to include a bibliography was impossible. Where those classes were limited, other classes made up the slack.

When new items were purchased for the library and cataloged, they were placed on a special bookcase by the circulation desk. Anyone entering the library would see these new items. Students quickly learned of the materials that were for their classes and that the items could be checked out to be used as research material.

During a faculty meeting, I had permission to lead a discussion about gathering good research source material. The faculty decided that they would no longer accept material cited from Google or Wikipedia. All sources must be from scholarly publications and cited properly as well. The faculty agreed that the librarian should be invited into the classroom to explain to the students how to access the catalog and databases, whether from the library or home. These were giant changes!

The plan to increase the library's usage statistics was slowly taking shape. Although my goal had been to have all these changes fully operational within three years, such was not the case. There had been many years where the library was not able to spend any money to purchase materials leaving the collection with significant gaps of quality resources quoted by new sources. In many instances, it was impossible to purchase these older resources because they were no longer available. I prepared a list of the resources that I felt were critical to the collection and I went back to the faculty asking if they would be willing to donate their copies to the library. Area

pastors who used the library were also contacted to see if they would donate any of the titles to the library. Amazingly, several hundred volumes were added to the collection.

Accreditation Visit

Faculty syllabi were consistently following the template setup by the Provost including a bibliography of source materials for students to consult when writing their research papers. Whenever possible, ebooks were purchased along with print when the library ordered items. When journal subscriptions were renewed, electronic access was sought. Survey results indicated that students preferred paper copies of books, but electronic copies of journals. Having electronic copies of popular books helped those who left doing their research until the last moment when all “the good stuff” was checked out.

When it came time for an accreditation visit, I felt confident that the evaluator would be positive about the library. It did not matter who the evaluator talked with, the answers were always positive regarding the library. It was evident that the work required to make administrators, faculty, and students stakeholders in the library was now a reality. The accreditation report highlighted the positive role the library played in the education of the students, making them lifelong learners.

Habits for Living in the Future

The students of today are in a stage of flux. No longer are the majority content to come to a campus, sit in a classroom, visit a library, and read a book. Schools struggle to attract and keep students until graduation. The new “normal” sees a student seriously looking at the value that education will provide before selecting a school. With smartphone in hand, the student enters the classroom ready to use technology to increase their knowledge (EAB Global, 2019).

The library needs to be prepared to serve these students effectively. Although there will always be some students who will want to hold a book in their hands to read and study, many more will choose to access the book electronically. Accessing journal citations will come from full-text databases and not from the print periodical shelves. Will the library’s integrated system heretofore relied upon for keeping track of all the library’s holdings now be able to handle all the electronic materials that our constituents will demand from us? The library collection will be composed mainly of “invisible” materials while print materials are reducing.

Conclusion

Leading the library into the future is challenging. There are many examples of research currently available to help schools adjust to changing student expectations. Libraries must adjust from past patterns, looking to reliable sources (Malpas, Schonfeld, Stein, Dempsey, & Marcum, 2018) for help. It is hoped that as administrators, faculty, and librarians work together, they will be able to point their students in the right direction making them lifelong learners. †

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