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The Big Challenges of Small Libraries

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Academic libraries serve students, staff and faculty at the world's colleges and universities, supporting teaching, learning and research (and once in a while, shooting a music video). As Dr. Camila A. Alire, former ALA President, put it, "Academic librarianship is for those who are constantly intellectually curious and who can apply that curiosity to efforts that help increase the knowledge base of the institution."

In fulfilling that role, librarians have to learn to work with the physical and financial resources at their disposal, which can vary widely. The largest academic library in the world, at Harvard University, has over 20 million volumes and 5.4 terabytes of born-digital assets in its collection, which is managed by about 800 librarians. Its operating budget is around $160 million.

In contrast, some of the smallest academic libraries might have a few hundred thousand volumes in their collections, which are managed by just a handful of people. Their expenditures might be no more than $500,000 a year.

Librarians at such small and medium-sized institutions face several challenges that their larger colleagues don't, such as greater budgetary and staff constraints. Yet, these libraries are expected to provide the same services as their larger counterparts.

In this and subsequent posts, we'll take a look at six of the typical challenges of small and medium academic libraries today – and how they can tackle them.

A small staff

With relatively few people on staff, library services and hours may have to be unavoidably restricted. At the same time, librarians might find themselves taking on multiple roles, each of which might be separate jobs at larger institutions. While this might foster close relationships with students, faculty, and administrators, it rarely translates into an increase in human resources.

Stretched for time

With few personnel trying to complete many tasks, smaller libraries are chronically short on time. Librarians are unable to provide students and faculty the support they would have liked and in a timely fashion. Instead, they find their time taken up by routine managerial and circulation processes.

Limited collections

Small and medium libraries are defined, among other parameters, by the size and breadth of their collections. This means they may be more dependent on collaboration, in some cases, or on remote services and electronic resources. As such, however, they must often pay close attention to the management and interlibrary loan systems used by their national library or the larger libraries with which they commonly work.

Inadequate systems

Small and medium academic libraries often use relatively outdated library management systems, or even a patchwork of systems and homemade workarounds accrued over the years. This may be due to inertia or an inability to justify major upgrade expenditures, even as the library grows and technology changes. In heavily manual managerial ecosystems, the smaller library may even be operationally dependent on the expertise and experience of a single individual.

Costly waste

Small and medium academic libraries that are dealing with out-of-date systems find it hard

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to keep pace with the latest technological developments in resource management. They also typically have to dedicate constant attention to their systems, which consumes the valuable time and effort of both librarians and the institution's IT personnel. The result is waste that might otherwise be avoided.

Shrinking budgets

Chronic budget constraints are at the heart of many other challenges on this list, and make it hard to find and adopt solutions that meet dynamic library needs. Librarians must do more with less – fewer personnel, inadequate technology, and limited resources – and projected 2021 budgets are tighter than ever.

All of these challenges force many academic library administrators to keep their eyes open for opportunities to optimize, cut costs and increase versatility. As they do so, librarians on the floor (or perhaps, nowadays, over Zoom) are dedicated to providing excellent service, knowledge and value to patrons, faculty and their institutions.

Can they "do it all"?

We'll dive into answering that question in coming posts in this series.

This blog post is part of a series exploring the typical challenges of small and medium academic libraries today – and how they can tackle them. To read and explore more blog posts in the series, please make sure you visit:

Part 2: A Small Library Staff Can Do Much More Than You Think

Part 3: Finding a Force-Multiplier for Collections and Management

Part 4: Centralizing, Optimizing and Cutting Costs

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