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The Research and Development Imperative in the Academic Library: Path to the Future

James G. Neal

Librarianship is an “information poor” information profession. Decisions are routinely not supported by the evidence of well-designed investigations. Research in the field is poorly communicated, understood, and applied. It is imperative that academic librarians and higher education libraries develop and carry out systematic research and development programs.

What is research and development (R&D)? Research is thorough investigation, experimentation focused on the discovery and interpretation of new facts, and the practical application of new or revised theories or laws. Development is making research results visible, available, and useful. R&D is thus solving real problems in real situations. R&D has its roots in the late nineteenth century corporation when new products and processes became essential to market share and profit. The needs of national defense and global economics pushed the U.S. government into a major R&D role through two world wars. American universities have developed over the last 50 years as major centers of R&D activity and technology transfer, particularly as a result of expanding federal investment through grants. Other organizations in the not-for-profit sector, including libraries, have not advanced an R&D capacity or commitment. This needs to change.

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I have worked with two R&D organizations based in academic libraries: the Digital Knowledge Center at Johns Hopkins University and the Center for Research in Information Access, now the Center for Information Technology Research and Development,

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at Columbia University. They share many important characteristics. Both are focused on new knowledge creation and act as laboratories for experimentation. Both are valuable venues for faculty and corporate collaboration. Both are interested in technology transfer and the potential to capitalize their research results. Both rely heavily on federal and foundation funding for their existence and growth. Both seek solutions to technology, information, and service problems with the library as the research environment. Both draw heavily on the experience and expertise of library staff. Both support library decision-making and advance priorities like digital library development. Both contribute to the visibility and reputation of the library and influence positively organizational culture.

These two centers also evidence several key issues to be confronted in the implementation of such R&D programs. Should the R&D program be sustained as a series of projects or as a systematic enterprise? Should the R&D program be based in a center or distributed across the organization? Should the center be separate with its own dedicated staff or more integrated, involving library staff in research projects? How are library, technology, and research skills to be developed? How will the resource development mandate be implemented and the grants application process be organized and staffed? Will the R&D program be subsidized or self-sustaining? Will there be an expectation or requirement that results of the R&D program be shared in appropriate professional forums and publications?

Librarians have a fundamental responsibility to contribute to professional communication. It produces important benefits. The individual gains personal satisfaction, professional growth and esteem, and opportunities for career advancement. The library secures staff who are knowledgeable about the research and publishing process, better able to evaluate professional literature, provide service to researchers, and apply these talents and understanding to library needs. The profession develops an improved network of communication and growth in the understanding of library problems and solutions.

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information—that is, R&D. The R&D agenda should reflect individual interest, organizational priority, professional importance, and even national need. This combination guarantees enthusiasm, the application of the results, a wide readership, and the potential for external funding.

Too much important information produced in libraries and by librarians never gets shared or applied beyond the local level, in spite of expanding outlets for communication. Perhaps because of the predominance of “glad tidings and testimonials” in the professional literature, librarians have a certain cynicism and guilt about publishing in librarianship, and question its quality, value, relevance, impact, and pri-

ority. Libraries must support the research activities of librarians, and this includes some basic elements: inspiration, training, criticism, financial assistance, consultative services, equipment, a mentoring and professional network, time, rewards, recognition, and an R&D context and agenda.

The R&D agenda in the academic library can draw from national information technology priorities, including: software for computer systems engineering and applications, scalable and robust information infrastructures, high-end computing technologies and architectures, human-computer interfaces, the social and economic impacts of technology, digital rights management, network and system security, and antiterrorism.

The R&D agenda in the academic library can draw from the higher education information technology priorities, including: next generation networks, integration of technology in teaching and learning, virtual universities, digital libraries, information policy, information technology organization and staffing, enterprise-wide management of information assets, and the replacement of administrative systems.

The R&D agenda in the academic library can draw from institutional priorities for technology, including: universal access to integrated information, support for access and use of information, the creation and distribution of digital information, tools for analyzing and manipulating information, system design for usability, and knowledge management.

The R&D agenda in the academic library can draw from the organization's own strategic framework: innovation in the design of space, the transition from analog to electronic collections, new technology-based and customized services, sophisticated and open access to information, preservation and archiving of resources, new models of scholarly publishing, support for electronic pedagogy, staff recruitment and development, entrepreneurial resource development, and digital collection development, for example.

Whatever the contents of the R&D agenda, there will need to be heightened attention to innovation, to rethinking the physical, expertise, and intellectual infrastructure of the library, to adopting the culture of enterprise, including business plans, competition, scalability, and venture capital. Research and development in the academic library are no longer options. All libraries of all missions and sizes can produce new knowledge and communicate research results to others. The information base of the field is ours to nurture, develop, support, contribute to, read, share, critique, applaud, and use. The future vitality of academic librarianship depends on it.

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