A couple of years ago the Education Advisory Board (now known as EAB) released a thoughtful and detailed assessment of the future of libraries. The home page for the report (which seems to be restricted to members - but see the foot of this post) offers an overview of their thinking, and there is a detailed presentation available.

The executive summary for the 2011 report read:
Academic libraries are faced with a daunting series of challenges brought on by the digital revolution. In an era when millions of books, articles, images, and videos available instantaneously via the web, libraries across all institutional types are experiencing declining demand for their traditional services, built around the storage and dissemination of physical resources.

At the same time, new demand for digital information services and collaborative learning spaces promise new areas of opportunity and engagement with patrons. A rapid and orderly transition to “the library of the future” requires difficult trade-offs, however, as no institution can afford to continue expanding both its commitment to comprehensive, local print collections as well as new investments in staff, technology, and renovations.

This report illustrates how progressive academic libraries are evolving in response to these challenges, providing case studies and best practices in managing library space, staff, and resources.

This week, a colleague brought to my attention a summary note from EAB, addressed to Provosts, which made some valid points on the challenges and pressures facing academic libraries, and the obstacles standing in the way of deep transformation.

The central point of their argument was simple: that libraries are straddling two worlds, the ‘traditional’ print library, and the library centered upon digital content. Simply put, their perspective is that the former - often facing declining demand - represents the popular image of the library. The second, which has emerged over the past 20 years, is now the center of huge demand for digital tools, content, and services, an environment which few of
us are fully equipped to support.

The world of hybrid libraries, in which we balance both analog and digital collections and services, has been with us for a couple of decades now. We remain challenged by the need to finance both, seeking trade-offs and economies of scale and scope wherever possible. At times, it feels as though we face a choice between being patchily good, or uniformly average, as few libraries are able to fund universal excellence. Every year, when I have to approve payment of large sums to publishers, I wonder when the efficiencies brought about by technology will flow through to the costs I pay!

Whilst the balance between print and digital content will continue to change, there will remain a blend of both: a need to steward, and continue to grow, print-based collections, and a demand for accelerated investment in digital-based media and tools.

My own sense is that we need to take a fresh look at how best to structure, resource, and deliver library services. We can point to a long history of resource sharing, and we have recently been challenged to look at fresh approaches to collections - deploying the power of the network to deliver a universal library at scale. But can we collaborate in other ways by virtue of geographic proximity? That is the focus of an exploration between my own library at Carnegie Mellon University and our neighbors at the University of Pittsburgh. We’ll be reporting on our work over the next few weeks, and I’ll keep you posted.

Let me return to the report with which I started, and comment briefly on the points brought to Provosts’ attention. The barriers identified by EAB are:
1. The growth of electronic book formats and radically different acquisition models has been slower than many anticipated, and resistance by both publishers and purchasers has made large investments in ebooks infeasible.

As I talk with faculty and students, I am acutely aware of the difficulties they face in using academic electronic book services. They point to very happy experiences with mainstream ebooks such as those provided for the Amazon Kindle or made available by public libraries through OverDrive. In the academic setting, whilst there are good examples of things working well, too often they have to put up with page-by-page viewing and download and print limits. These are clumsy and inelegant, and downright frustrating for those who simply wish to have access offline to a complete book. We owe it to our clients to lobby publishers and ebook providers for better service. In an era of activist shareholders, should we be forming groups of activist consumers?

2. Rising journal prices are catalyzing increased interest in alternative publishing venues and more flexible licensing arrangements, but many are skeptical of the capacity of libraries to alter the publishing behavior of faculty.
In many universities, especially in North America, the systems of tenure and promotion are critical. I have heard first-hand (not at Carnegie Mellon) senior faculty claim that in reviewing cases, they ignore any scholarly output published in open access. Thankfully, attitudes are changing, and rapidly, powered by the intervention of research funded mandates and university policies. The library does have a vital role to play: as champions of open access and reform of scholarly communication. We can point to many use cases, and to research of the highest calibre which has been published in open access form. We have a unique position on campus - as trusted, neutral, partners in the research process, respected for our thoughtful advice. And we have a unique position as intermediaries between our faculty and publishers.

3. Large print collections make sweeping library renovations expensive, politically sensitive, and labor-intensive.

Frankly, I see this as one of the biggest issues confronting library leaders today. We have abundant data points to show a severe decline in the use of printed books in our collections. Instinctively, we know that lesser-used materials are better cared for in climate-controlled environments, away from public spaces inhabited by humans. Rationally, we know that we ought to relocate large portions of collections to a more hospitable environment. In turn, we can use space that has been freed up to build a contemporary learning environment that enhances the student experience. But too often, book relocation programs face hostile reaction, especially from those who value the serendipity that appears to arise from the ability to browse large-scale collections on open stacks. I see two needs here: the first is technological - can we, somehow, replicate the book stack in digital form?
What is it that triggers someone to remove a book from its shelf? Is it the proximity of the chosen book to other items? Is it the newness of the book - or evidence of a well-thumbed and much respected volume? Is it size, or color, or the words on the spine? A detailed study would yield great insight that could inform those managing large-scale digital libraries, such as the Hathi Trust. Maybe Amazon’s ‘customers who bought this item also bought’ is the model to follow, but I feel a need for something much more granular.

Secondly, with a few exceptions, libraries everywhere are wrestling with the professional drive to reduce the size of collections on open shelves, and the associated angst this generates on campus. I’m sure there is scope for us to work together - partly to share advice and insights on how to manage the process, but also to share responsibility for the collective collection. Whilst, on the one hand, we could each build large stores, and strive to keep everything in perpetuity, we know rationally that, as in so many other situations, we can benefit from sharing the load, and distributing costs. In my experience, being able to assure faculty that collections are being preserved amongst consortia can be a huge benefit.

4. **Many library staff spend most of their time managing aging, less relevant resources and lack the expertise needed to adapt to radically different user needs.**

This point has some validity, but I fear it misses the change in outlook and skills development that I have been privileged to see amongst my colleagues in a number of different libraries. Librarians have been quick to embrace new opportunities, such as those offered by the establishment of data management services, and the demand for bibliometrics expertise. Cataloguers have
embraced metadata creation, seeking to describe digitized objects in the same manner as printed books, music scores and other ‘conventional’ objects. Providing a clear sense of direction is necessary, but the provision of adequate training and development opportunities is even more critical. Those of us responsible for libraries in major research universities ought to forge partnerships with information and library schools to encourage the development of rigorous post-qualification training and certification opportunities. I spoke at a conference in Urbana Champaign last September with my colleague, Liz Lyon, from the University of Pittsburgh’s iSchool on how we have partnered to develop a data management course which meets the needs of current students, whilst simultaneously offering opportunities to experienced librarians.

The EAB report offers much insight into the environment in which we operate. It is evident that the headline points need greater nuance in shaping understanding. This points to the need for greater conversations inside the academy - all seeking to provide a shared perspective on the future of libraries.

What does it mean to be a great library in the 21st century?

I'd love to hear your thoughts.

Footnote - you may find that your institution is a member of EAB, allowing you access to their report series. To create a personal account, go to EAB.com, select Member Login and then new user, enter your country, city, state and follow the links.
Keith Webster

When Washington Post wrote up Wayback Machine as a good thing, people took note and became supportive
@brewster_kahle #cni15s
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Above Boston Public Library - “Free to all” - inspired
@internetarchive - it crawled hosts once every two months from 1996 #cni15s
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