

Libraries Must Transform: Muddling through is not enough

From the Director, Ginger Saha

“Libraries dealing with the future now” is the title of the *ARL Bimonthly Report 234*¹ of June 2004. The Association of Research Libraries has its non-profit organizational finger on the pulse of academia and the libraries that serve it, and *Report 234* offers their prognostic findings on the health of the academy in tight fiscal times. The medical history was taken by Alan E. Guskin and Mary B. Marcy of the Project on the Future of Higher Education², and was recorded in their paper “Dealing with the future now: principles for creating a vital campus in a climate of restricted resources,” *Change* 35, no. 4 (July/August 2003): 10-21³.

They describe a patient who is “muddling through,” i.e. “[A] time-honored practice for dealing with recurring fiscal problems in higher education...the immediate response to an annual budget shortfall is to balance the budget by draining all available unspent dollars from existing accounts...” *ibid.*, 14. The case was discussed by a group of librarians at a retreat in Tucson, Arizona, in September 2003. The therapy they prescribe is radical: “Faced with continuing reductions in real dollars (i.e., inflation-adjusted dollars), **higher education institutions and their libraries need to be fundamentally restructured to survive** [emphasis added] as vital, high-quality entities that continually enhance student learning while maintaining quality of faculty and staff work-life... *Report 234*: 8. Tough medicine! Can we get a second opinion? It’s too late. The Tucson group concludes, “whether or not campuses choose to change, **libraries will not have a choice. We cannot continue to conduct business as usual** [emphasis added].” *ibid.*, 8.

What does this mean in practical terms for the “patient” libraries? *Report 234* notes “the complexity of finding a balance between print collections and true digital environments,” *ibid.*, 8. We have been coping with this for almost a decade now, since the advent of electronic versions of the print journals we have traditionally purchased, bound, shelved, and kept forever. In the early days, it was easy to have both formats, since the electronic access came along with the print subscription for free, or for a modest surcharge. Now, many journal publishers see the “digital environment” as the primary vehicle for revenues, and the “trailing print” is considered a nuisance. They are moving to make continuing a print subscription such a bitter pill, i.e. so disproportionately expensive, that libraries can no longer subscribe to both formats, and have to choose between them. This is bad news: librarians love the print, but our users love the electronic. Directors cry out, “We can’t give up print! We won’t cave to pressure from the instant-gratification crowd!! This won’t happen on my watch!!!” The Tucson crowd anticipated this denial phase, though, and sternly remind us, “**Libraries must transform** because librarians recognize the role libraries have, regardless of mission or size, in continually enhancing student learning **using the best available technologies and techniques** [emphasis added].” *ibid.*, 8.

Moving through the 5 Stages of Grief, we now get angry with the publishers and digital-only-please! users who have caused this condition; bargain with funding agencies to support the dual environment a little bit longer so we can demonstrate the synergies of having both; suffer depression at the prospect of abandoning the print collections that once made us great in the library rankings, and brought people in to the library, and generated photocopying dollars; and finally, accept the inevitability of cancellations of the now spurned trailing print. Grief workers would tell us to acknowledge the loss, and then to adjust to the new reality and “reinvest” in it. Reinvest, indeed! Electronic journals are taking every dollar we have. If only we could be confident the e-journals of 2005 will be there for our users in 2025.

¹<http://www.arl.org/newsltr/234/dealing.html>

²<http://www.pfhe.org/>

³<http://www.pfhe.org/docs/ChangeFinal.pdf>