

Trends and Value of Academic Libraries in the 21st Century

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Within the scope of the 21st century, the academic library has proven to be an irreplaceable resource for students, faculty, and outside patrons. Academic libraries have enjoyed the ongoing status within their community, as they serve as the heart of the university. However, the ongoing value of the academic library maintains despite the generalized modern stagnant perception of libraries as a whole. Many academic libraries aim to move beyond the scope of their traditional resources, broadening their reach to better serve the community. As a result, the academic library has proven its responsiveness, flexibility, and drive to better the experiences of those that it serves. Faced by a period of constant social, political, technological, and global change, the academic library has proven its value within the university community, changing its approach to meet the needs of students, faculty, and community users.

Throughout the 21st century, technology has remained the source of much evolution and growth. Traditionally, the book has been viewed as the foundation of the academic library. However, technological growth has induced a movement from print resources to online databases as the academic library has been faced with the need for a change in approach to remain relevant within the community (Budd, 2012, p. 202). In recent years, students and faculty have been carrying out their work from a variety of locations, forcing the academic library to accommodate distance learning. In doing so, the library has had to vastly expand their online collection so that patrons are able to access information anywhere and anytime. This highlights the academic library's responsiveness to changing user needs, defining the development of the institution as a whole (Bentum, 1999, p. 1). Thus, collection development has become a prominent topic within academic libraries as librarians aim to identify needs, select resources, acquire materials, and evaluate usage (Uziel, 2017, p. 102). When accompanied by technological demands, academic libraries have shifted their focus from in-house collections to inter-

institutional collections. By creating a community of resources, academic libraries are able to work together to improve the overall access to both traditional and nontraditional materials, further enriching the experience of faculty and students. Thus, academic libraries have shifted their emphasis from ownership to access, working together to ensure that their patrons have the ability to retrieve information from as many resources as possible (Uziel, 2017, p. 105).

The push for open access to materials heightened in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, as students and faculty were required to continue academic activities in a remote setting. As learning became virtual, supporting resources moved to the same online platform. This marks one of the most impactful changes within the trajectory of academic libraries, as the need for open access emerged as a means of continuing education in the midst of crisis. The subsequent emphasis on the new Open Access movement changed the scope of academic libraries for the better, as education remains largely virtual in the post-pandemic world. For instance, distance education students are able to be included within the community as the library is able to assist from any location. By accommodating both in person and online learning, the library is able to ensure their relevance within the greater community as they move away from limiting themselves to one niche (Faires, 2017, p. 184). This has greatly legitimized online education and leveled academic the playing field, as students are not forced to attend college in the traditional setting to obtain a valuable education. Furthermore, academic libraries have been able to reduce the cost of college as a whole, as students are able to access most class materials for free from anywhere. By facilitating equal access to resources, academic libraries are able to impact the financial wellbeing and subsequent success of the student body (Salem, 2017, p. 34).

By evaluating the needs of each unique demographic of users, the academic library is able to positively impact the educational experience of their community. When working with

faculty, the academic library is able to offer research resources and instructional support. Rather than maintaining a passive approach on campus, the academic library aims to collaborate with other faculty members. This allows academic librarians to have a say in campus functions, while providing outside faculty members with the opportunity to influence the university library. Additionally, academic libraries aim to actively engage with the student body, reaching out with opportunities and proving their fundamental role within the learning process. Furthermore, libraries aim to promote the exploration and evaluation of materials. This promotes the fundamental creation of knowledge, rather than simply providing students with what others have written (Budd, 2012, p. 283). In addition, many academic librarians aim to work with professors when instructing students. Focusing on those who are at the beginning of their academic journey, academic librarians often create lessons that introduce students to the world of libraries. In doing so, librarians teach student valuable research skills to use throughout their academic careers and beyond. Ultimately, academic librarians hope to empower students with the confidence and resources to navigate their way through the physical and digital library space. This may be one of the most important functions of the academic library, as institutions are able to provide tools to students that will enable lifelong learning.

In addition to the development of active outreach, academic libraries are physically changing to support the needs of their community. While weeding has always been a crucial part of academic librarianship, many professionals are placing specific emphasis on actively enhancing the accessibility and relevance of their collections. Furthermore, the traditional uses of the library space are changing. Historically, academic libraries have maintained limited hours of operation and served as a space for research using in-house materials. However, the 21st century library places emphasis on the use of the space for collaboration. Thus, academic libraries have

been prompted to add open seating options, study rooms, meeting rooms, and computer lounges in addition to their collection spaces. This opens the academic library to all students and faculty, as there is a space for everyone.

In addition to procuring a productive and welcoming environment, academic library staff are tasked with maintaining the physical space. Libraries are a unique campus resources, as the facilities are often used more frequently than other spaces. Additionally, academic libraries often have extended hours of operation to better serve the needs of the student body. As a result, the maintenance of an academic library is critical to its functionality. Many libraries are designed to have a number of physical accessibility options, security systems, and open spaces for used and collection growth. In addition to resources that make the library physically useable, universities are moving towards housing collections in outside storage, creating more study space within the physical building, adding cafés, and moving student success services to library buildings. By making these changes, parent organizations hope to draw more students to the physical space and mark the academic library as the heart of the campus.

Despite the multitude of positive changes and outcomes, academic libraries encounter a number of struggles as they aim to positively impact their serviced community. Budgeting and funding serve as the most impactful hardships of academic libraries, as staff struggle to make decisions that will impact the holistic trajectory of the organization. Librarians are prompted to make strategic monetary decisions, as budget increases and decreases directly impact the library's collection. In a community college library, much of the collection is allocated towards resources that focus on the success of undergraduate programs. University libraries often focus their materials on supporting current and future graduate and research programs (Fisher & Read, 2017, p. 135). Academic librarians are tasked with procuring a collection that serves the greater

mission of the university while balancing a tight budget. Within both colleges and universities, monetary funding comes from the parent organization's operating budget. Additionally, endowments, gifts, and funds through grants are further sources of monetary support. As a result of high demand and generally low funding, librarians often carefully allocate the majority of funding to personnel costs and materials.

Despite modern changes and challenges, academic libraries have maintained their place within the educational community. Given the flexibility and reach of the academic library, the profession provides value to their parent institution in a number of ways. Academic libraries maintain their well-established value to the student body by promoting achievement, fostering independent learning, and supporting success. Similarly, academic libraries maintain value to the faculty by improving teaching and participating in research. Finally, academic libraries prove value to the institution and community as a whole by promoting enrollment, positively impacting graduation rates, providing access to technology and other resources, and enhancing collaboration. As a result of this multifaceted approach, academic libraries remain at the heart of their community today and will maintain this position for years to come.

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