

LIBRARIES,
LEADERSHIP,
AND SCHOLARLY
COMMUNICATION

Essays by
RICK ANDERSON



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PREFACE

AS MANY OF MY COLLEAGUES have noticed—with varying mixtures of amusement, pleasure, alarm, and disgust—I write a lot.

The main reason for this is that I'm too scatterbrained and unfocused to think about things. I try, but I can't do it; as soon as I start pondering, I immediately get distracted by e-mail, other people, music, iPhone Scrabble, squirrels, the need to trim my nails, or just other, more interesting thoughts. In order to think about something I have to do one of three things: run, talk, or write. And of those three, writing is the one most likely to result in something concretely useful. The problem with running is that I get good ideas while I'm doing it, but I forget them by the time I get home. The problem with talking is that my colleagues always seem to be "busy" doing "work," and my wife's patience with library shoptalk is, apparently, limited. So if an issue or a problem catches my interest and I want to work through its implications, the most effective (and considerate) way for me to do so is to open up a Word document and start typing. It feels a little bit like sitting down with a wadded-up tangle of string and slowly pulling the wad apart until it's straight. Usually, about 1,500 words later, I've figured out what I think about that thing—and, sometimes, those 1,500 words will turn out to be something that an editor believes other people will want to read.

This process has resulted in thousands of written products over the past twenty-five years that have been published in a variety of manifestations: columns, reviews, opinion essays, articles, white papers, blog postings, etc. And as I went through them to find items for inclusion in this book, I looked for patterns—patterns in the topics that I've covered, in the arguments I've made, and in the ideas and underlying concerns that have emerged as recurring themes.

One thing I noticed is that I seem to be drawn generally toward the idea of forced choices, and the ways in which being required to choose tends to result in conflict, both within ourselves as individuals (as we struggle to reconcile our own competing priorities and desires) and

between us as colleagues (as we try to distribute money, time, energy, and space in support of important programs and projects). Anyone who reads these essays is going to encounter the concepts of forced choices and conflicting values, in various guises, over and over again. Why is that?

Some of it probably has to do with the fact that I'm the oldest child of a large family. And as anyone who has lived with one can tell you, we oldest children tend to have a thing about rules. One of the rules is this: if you have strictly limited resources, you have to make choices. And whenever you're forced to make choices, values are going to come into conflict: it's at the point of unavoidable choice-making that the argument "But X is a good thing!" is no longer sufficient to carry the day because Y and Z are good things too, and yet we don't have enough money or time or space or energy to do all three of them.

This is the point at which I start getting really interested. Questions like "Do people love the library?" and "Does intellectual freedom matter?" and "Should everyone have free access to scholarly information?" are not interesting to me because the correct answer to such questions is so trivially obvious that, really, the only reason I can imagine for even asking them is if we're looking for an excuse to congratulate ourselves. Much more interesting to me are questions like these:

"How much time and energy are our patrons demonstrably willing to expend in order to use the library?"

"What are we, as librarians, willing to give up in order for our patrons (and our colleagues) to have meaningful intellectual freedom?"

"How much does it cost to make scholarly information freely available to the public, and who should pay—and by what mechanisms?"

Each of those questions requires us to deal with the concept of cost, which is another way of saying "forced choice." If we have two options, one of which is objectively and demonstrably bad and the other of which is objectively and demonstrably good, then there probably won't be much conflict in the choice-making—all of us prefer good things over bad ones. Difficulty arises when both options are good and we can't have both.

Whenever we, as members of an organization like a library, are forced to choose between good things, we may start by trying to figure out some way to have both things. But in many cases, that will turn out to be impossible and we'll have to decide which good thing is going to

take priority over the other. We can't make that decision without invoking values, and the moment we start invoking values is when the conversation can take a really difficult and interesting turn. In a market-driven organization there's a powerful, built-in incentive to confront these questions and resolve them quickly—because if you don't, you'll go out of business. But in mission-driven organizations like libraries there's a powerful, built-in incentive to gloss over such questions and pretend they aren't real—because confronting them requires you to deal with the painful truth that not everyone in the organization has the same priorities and wants the same things in the same amounts.

And this brings me to the issue of provocation and controversy. Some years back, a somewhat well-known member of the library commentariat collared me in the hallway at a conference and asked me something startling. I don't remember his exact words, but the gist of his question was this: "The stuff you write and say in meetings is just to provoke, right? You don't really mean any of it, do you?"

I was so taken aback by the question that I honestly don't remember exactly how I answered it. I'm afraid that I probably said something conciliatory and reassuring. If I did, then I was being less than fully honest, and I figure now is as good a time as any to set the record straight.

The truth is that I would never write or say something just to provoke a reaction, or even just to spur a different kind of thinking. I'm not interested in provocation for the sake of provocation. If I say something in writing or in a public talk, I mean it, and I'm willing to stand behind it. In the years that have passed since that encounter in the hallway, I've often wished I'd had the presence of mind and the guts to say that in the moment.

This doesn't mean that I believe I'm always right, of course, and there may well be things I've said in the past that I would disavow today. But I meant them when I said them and continued to mean them until I was convinced otherwise or until circumstances changed sufficiently to alter my position. (In fact, several of the essays in this collection have been edited to reflect changes in my thinking since they were originally published.)

The reality is that I have no particular interest in being provocative, nor am I very interested in preserving tradition or being innovative, in promoting group solidarity or championing uniqueness, in being a good doobie or being a rebel.

What does interest me very much is *seeing things as they really are*. I make no claim to being better at this than anyone else is—but wanting to see things as they really are is what interests me and what drives me

to write and speak. It's what drives me to think hard about issues that seem important, and to say what I believe is really true. If what seems to me to be true doesn't sound particularly innovative, or if it sounds provocative, or if it goes against tradition, or if it supports tradition, I'm fine with that. When it comes to library practices, I care about what works—but, of course, you can't figure out what works unless you know what you're trying to do, and you can't figure out what you're going to try to do unless you set priorities, and you can't set priorities without invoking values, and now we're back to those difficult conversations again.

Difficult Conversations was actually one of the candidates for a title to this book. But I rejected it because I don't want to focus on "difficulty"; I want to focus on figuring out what's true and what works. My hope is that these essays have made, and will continue to make, some contribution to that effort.

SECTION I
LIBRARIES AND
THEIR COLLECTIONS,
NOW AND IN THE
FUTURE

Being Essential Is Not Enough

IS THERE ANY APPLAUSE LINE in our profession more tried-and-true than the assertion that “libraries are essential”? It comes in multiple forms, all of them familiar: “Libraries are the cornerstone of democracy”; “The library is the heart of the campus”; “Libraries are rungs on the ladder of opportunity”; etc.

The problem with such statements is not that they’re wrong. In fact, arguments supporting the idea that “libraries are essential”—whether to the academy or to society generally—vary in quality. Some of them are stronger, some are weaker. But there is a problem with all of them, and the problem is that they pose a danger: to the degree that we, as librarians, take them to heart, they all threaten to leave us complacent about our future. What will determine our future is not whether we and our services are *essential in fact*, but whether we are seen by our stakeholders as *more essential than the other essential programs and projects that are competing for the same resources*.

To put it more simply: being essential is no guarantee of survival. Essential things are lost every day.

Consider the federal budget sequestration crisis of 2013. The sequestration proposal, with its automatic and massive budget cuts, was conceived as a kind of “nuclear option,” a budget-cutting scenario so odious that the threat of it would force all legislative parties to the negotiating table in order to avoid its implementation. Before it was implemented, many observers would have said that the things it threatened to cut were “essential”—education funding, military readiness, disaster relief—and, arguably, those observers would have been correct. And yet the cuts happened anyway—not because the things that were cut

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turned out not to be essential after all, but because being “essential” is no guarantee of safety.

Here’s a hard truth to which I think we, in academic libraries, pay far too little attention, either because we don’t believe it’s true or because its truth is too painful for us to consider: academic libraries, as we know them, do not have to stay in business. Here’s an even harder truth: no library *should* stay in business if it fails to give reasonable value in return for the huge amount of campus resources it consumes.

On every campus, the library represents an enormous institutional investment—in some cases, it is the institution’s single most expensive program. Yet, unlike many of the schools and departments into which the university sinks far less of its strictly limited resources, the library usually brings in relatively little (if any) external funding or other kinds of outside support. It takes and takes and takes, and what it gives back is intangible and difficult to assess and quantify.

Does the fact that the library’s outputs are intangible and hard to measure mean that we don’t, in fact, return good value? Absolutely not. What we do is arguably important, even “essential,” and we often make that argument articulately and persuasively. But in a higher-education environment characterized by scarce resources, we have to do more than just convince people of the fact that we’re needed.

The core problem we face is that on every campus, the number of arguably essential programs, projects, and capital purchases far outstrips the resources available to support them. Laboratories, classrooms, water and electrical systems, scholarship programs, and faculty recruitment are all essential, and all are competing for the same pool of university resources (which includes not only money but also space, administrative attention, and staff time). Essentialness is good at attracting dollars when dollars are available; it is not good at making dollars appear out of thin air.

Let’s consider some of the implications of that reality.

Put yourself in the position of a provost or vice president who is charged with allocating \$1 million across the various academic programs and infrastructural needs on her campus. One possible approach would be to divide up the \$1 million by simply giving 20 programs \$50,000 each. This approach would be easy, and would have the superficial appearance of fairness, but in most cases I believe it would be irresponsible.

The provost’s job is not to make sure that every program gets equal treatment, but rather to make sure that the university’s mission is being accomplished. No college or university focuses equally on every

discipline; some focus more on the humanities and social sciences, others on applied sciences. Some have a stronger outreach mission, others are more dedicated to international programs. The provost's job is to figure out how to use that \$1 million to move the university forward as effectively as possible. Depending on what "forward" means for that particular university, it may be that half of the money should go to the library; maybe 90 percent of it should go to scholarships.

In my experience, campus leaders tend to understand this intuitively and rarely distribute money evenly; instead, they try to distribute it in ways that mirror the mission of the university. That's why, if the library wants not only to be *called* "essential" but also to be *treated as if it is essential*, it had better be aligning itself with that mission—and doing so explicitly, visibly, and effectively.

What might some examples of that kind of alignment look like?

Let me begin by bragging about my own boss. When it came time to submit a budget request recently, our dean and university librarian, Alberta Comer, did not simply write a letter describing all the wonderful and worthwhile things the library does, followed by a request for additional support. Instead, she worked with her leadership team to create a two-part document: the first section outlined the library's significant achievements over the past year, and the second explained what we want to do in the coming year. Importantly, each of those sections was organized according to the university's explicitly expressed programmatic priorities. Thus, the message our vice president received was not "Here are all the reasons why you ought to give the library more money." Instead, it was "Here are some of the most important ways in which the library is moving the university toward its goals, and here are ways in which we could do that even better if we had more resources to work with."

The result was clear success. Although we certainly didn't get everything we asked for, the new allocation of recurring and one-time funds we did receive represented a disproportionately large share of what was available for distribution across campus. This is the takeaway lesson: map your library's programs and services to the mission of the university and you will be seen as an essential strategic partner, not just another piece of costly infrastructure. (Thanks to Yale University Librarian Susan Gibbons, who beautifully articulated this point during a conversation I had with her.)

Speaking of Yale, another great example of this kind of alignment comes from that university's Harvey Cushing/John Hay Whitney Medical Library, which has created, not only course modules that are

designed specifically to help the medical school achieve the goals of its Graduate Medical Education program, but also courses (in multiple versions) in evidence-based practice for the nursing school and, according to the library's interim director, John Gallagher, a program to help medical faculty and researchers comply with the National Institutes of Health's open-access policies. This last point suggests a second takeaway lesson: solving a problem that already exists for your faculty and has a tangible impact on their daily work (such as compliance with a mandate) is more likely to generate support for the library than trying to convince the faculty that they have a problem.

A third library organization that shines in this regard is the one at North Carolina State University. Seeing that its university was adopting a program of faculty cluster hiring in support of its overarching goal to "enhance interdisciplinary scholarship to address the grand challenges of society," associate dean Greg Raschke reports that the library system "is aligning its efforts across a spectrum of areas to foster the success of the clusters." These efforts include adapting existing collection-analysis tools to ensure that they map to the interdisciplinary clusters, offering dedicated collaboration space for use by faculty working in those clusters, reaching out to the clusters with targeted information about existing technology offerings in the libraries, and "providing dedicated subject specialists for each faculty cluster to work across the life-cycle of their research to offer guidance and connections to services such as visualization, GIS support, copyright guidance, bibliometric analysis, research data management, research funding tools, and collections." Here is the third takeaway lesson: sometimes aligning your library with institutional goals and programs means creating new services, and sometimes it means adapting old ones. Since our host institutions are always changing, it always means responding quickly and nimbly to new programs and priority shifts.

What can each of us do at our own institutions? Here are a few general guidelines:

- *Listen to your president and your provost.* And not just for obvious points of connection between what your campus leaders say and what the library traditionally does (student success, research impact, etc.). Listen also for areas of emphasis that you might not think of as relevant to the library. If the president says that one of her chief areas of concern is improving the six-year graduation rate, don't dismiss that as having nothing to do with the library—ask yourself what the library might do

differently (or what it might already be doing) that could have an impact on that goal, even if the goal doesn't seem to be connected directly to library services.

- *Monitor your university's public pronouncements, press releases, tweets, etc., and see what is said most often.* It's not just what your campus leaders and spokespersons say but how often and in how many contexts they say it that will tip you off to a particularly important or emerging area of institutional focus. If words and phrases like "applied research," "diversity," "international," "sustainability," "commercial partnerships," or "community impact" are repeatedly appearing in your university's public pronouncements, speeches, and press releases, you're getting a message. This is especially key for public colleges and universities, where everything that's said publicly is said with the keen understanding that lawmakers and other fiscal officers are listening. Ask yourself what your institution says when it knows the people who hold the purse strings are listening—then ask yourself how your library can help the institution make its case.
- *Become intimately familiar with your institution's strategic plan and its mission and vision statements.* These documents describe the programmatic skeleton that underlies everything your university is doing. If the library is doing things that don't help further the goals and strategies laid out in them, ask yourself why—and unless the answers you come up with are unusually compelling and can be defended (with a straight face) in conversation with your provost or vice president, seriously consider discontinuing them. If your library is doing things that actively undermine those goals and strategies, stop doing those things immediately. As you consider establishing new programs or practices in your library, ask yourself from the very beginning how those new programs or practices will help further the strategic mission of your institution.
- *Watch the curriculum, and don't confuse equality with fairness.* This is something that all academic libraries understand in principle, but we sometimes struggle with it in practice because its application is painful: no library that aligns itself to institutional priorities will end up serving all programs and all academic disciplines equally. This is true because no college or university places an equal strategic emphasis on every discipline and program. What this means is that our budgets and programmatic support should not be distributed equally

across disciplines but should reflect the curricular and strategic emphases of our host institutions. And since academic institutions rarely come right out and say, “We care more about physics than we do about astronomy,” this means your monitoring of institutional communications for strategic hints will have to be sensitive to nuance and informed by an awareness of how other campus resources are distributed.

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