



ISSUE BRIEF

21st-Century Collections: Calibration of Investment and Collaborative Actionⁱ

Deliberations over library collections will have no end. Balancing serial and monograph investments, assessing the latest digital format, anticipating new directions in teaching and research—this large undertaking resists all formulas. The Task Force on 21st-Century Research Library Collections defers for detail to the expertise that is spread so impressively across ARL libraries, seeking here to give a big picture of collections: to describe not everything on the map, but the general landscape we face today.

Twentieth-century research library collections were defined by local holdings, hailed as distinctive and vast. Twenty-first-century research library collections demand multiple strategies for ensuring broad access. Never before have we been required to grasp so many dimensions of research in order to make wise decisions. In a networked world, local collections as ends in themselves make learning fragmentary and incomplete. Twenty-first-century collection management will therefore require increased collaboration within and among institutions, as well as a shift from thinking of collections as *products* to understanding collections as *components* of the academy's knowledge resources. A multi-institutional approach is the only one that now makes sense. But the purpose of collections remains the same: to support the creation and dissemination of new knowledge.

Collective problems require collective action, which requires a shared vision. Having a shared vision does not mean that every research library must follow the same path; diversity is a source of strength. To flourish in the 21st century, research librarians must develop a broad understanding of the challenges faced by libraries and the scholars they support. Solutions are within reach if research libraries work together, taking traditional collaboration to a higher level and adding value to the research process.

This report calls for conversations to begin with stakeholders, including provosts, faculty, library administrative and advisory boards, and library staff, about our shared, multi-institutional future. The report identifies critical areas and relationships that research libraries must address. If these conversations are not already underway, now is the time to initiate them.

The Collaborative Future of Collections

New methods of research and emerging forms of cyber-scholarship are reshaping user needs and expectations. The networking of general collections, as well as archival material, has transformed scholarship. Libraries now support a global community of researchers who can discover broad holdings in a variety of places and who increasingly expect barrier-free access to that content. Museums and archives are next in line to be part of a routine search for “library” information. The fact that more material is available for collecting than ever before sharpens users' desire to have it all.

As libraries transition from institution-centric collections to a user-centric networked world, distributed collections should grow correspondingly. Traditional practices cannot easily scale to support this new environment. Emphasizing the shift from paper to e-texts understates the

change. Rather than focusing on acquiring the *products* of scholarship, the library is now an engaged agent supporting and embedded within the *processes* of scholarship. Collections management is now a juggling act, with the three plates to keep spinning marked *Local Needs*, *Shared Investment*, and *Coordinated Decisions*.

To date, no matter how skillfully we may have performed, we have lacked the metrics needed to demonstrate to the research community what we are doing for them. We will most likely move toward improving our metrics as we engage our communities in these conversations about key topics:

- Budgetary issues are pushing some libraries to meet local needs of faculty and students through more limited and demand-driven acquisitions. Maintaining the broad-based selection of the past while acquiring and preserving the large corpus of unique material available locally as well as globally requires unprecedented coordination and new strategies.
- Journal price inflation continues unabated and reflects a publishing industry clinging to an unsustainable model. More experimentation and collective action are needed to transform scholarship and reshape the marketplace. The open-content movement will continue to challenge the commercial market and libraries will play a variety of roles in this space, especially as intellectual property rights advisors, managers of institutional repositories, and as publishers.
- Research universities manage and preserve a massive array of digital assets—images, text, and data—and require robust data management and digital preservation programs. Providing such services becomes a collections priority as libraries engage more broadly in scholarly research processes and products. Building an infrastructure that supports collaborative data collections is essential and so too is e-publishing.
- Research libraries also have much to gain through increasing reliance on shared print-shelving facilities and collaborative preservation programs for both print and digital content. Digitization and data mining now offer opportunities to stimulate greater discovery of resources and to open up text for deeper analysis. Libraries today support these enriched texts and analytic techniques to appreciate the full range of what has been published, the unread and the forgotten as well as the titles that have remained in scholarly conversations.

There has never been a better time to be a researcher, or a worse time to think that the library enterprise is too big to fail. The potential of the wealth of resources will only be realized through coordinated and effective advocacy, discovery, and creativity by research library staff. Scholars already collaborate; libraries need to make it easier for them to do so. The enduring need within the library for deep subject expertise will increasingly be met by teamwork and cross-institutional partnerships.

The Landscape for 21st-Century Research Library Collections: Strategic Discussion Points

These features promise to shape collecting activity, associated costs, and the trajectory of research library engagement and investment.

Scholars/Researchers—*Scholar behavior, roles, communication vehicles*

- Global and interdisciplinary interests will continue to grow and thrive. Centers of strength for area collections will play a major role in serving these community interests.
- The value and role of “personal collections” will increase with the capacity to share more broadly. The data that live on the digital device of the scientist or humanist today, is moving to the library server tomorrow. A small circle of users will become a large one.
- Informal and formal mechanisms for sharing in-process or pre-publication works will increase in number and primacy within discipline communities.
- Copyright and rights management are becoming essential to the scholar’s ability to distribute and self-archive work. Intellectual property concerns must be part of the decisions about new technologies to access digital content.

Content—*Scope, complexity, priorities of collecting*

- Collecting is expanding in at least two critical dimensions: new formats of scholarly products (e.g., e-books and raw materials such as data) and resources that represent scholarly processes (e.g., blogs and wikis).
- New genres are emerging that represent compound objects (e.g., journal articles linked to databases or video presentations, content with interactive functionality).
- Stewardship of unique assets associated with an institution/library is an increasing priority (e.g., special collections, research data, institutional repositories). Capture and preservation of web resources will increase and create a new dimension to special collections.
- Equitable access to information about government and its programs is central to democracy; services associated with access to and preservation of government publications and data will remain important.

Publishing—*Publisher roles, economic models, rights management*

- Aggregations of content and mergers of publishers are likely to increase, as is greater integration of content (e.g., publisher platforms and services that integrate resources from other publishers). Smaller, independent publishers will increasingly be in jeopardy due to difficulties in sustaining their subscriber base and in investing in necessary technologies for delivery.
- Publishing output will continue to increase, as will the services to users that publishers offer. Publishers will experiment with new pricing models that incorporate usage, value, and market. The contributed value of authors, editors, and reviewers within the academy will gain attention.
- Digital preservation and archiving will be accepted as an integral component of publisher agreements. Librarians and other customers of electronic publishers will insist on the long-term retention of published content. Solutions are likely to come from outside the private sector.

- Open content of many types and diverse origins will proliferate with multiple for-profit and not-for profit varieties. Hybrid business models will grow in step with the search for revenue and efficiency that all of higher education is undertaking.

Infrastructure—*Access, preservation, collection management*

- Space concerns, increased digitization, and preservation issues will galvanize shared storage agreements. Governance over resource sharing will race to keep up with the growth of regional nodes for shared, managed collections. Winnowing collections in the context of collective agreements, shared offsite shelving, and coordinated print retention will become common in libraries of all sizes.
- With the shift in resources from preservation of print to the curation of digital scholarship, research libraries will need to maintain linked, digital content in order to enable discovery and future use.
- Changes in discovery services will redefine what constitutes a “collection” as represented in an institution’s catalog. Bringing coherence to discovery within disciplines will become a more urgent priority for library access services. Resources will increasingly be allocated to the development of tools, an activity well suited to inter-institutional collaboration.
- In an effort to increase efficiencies in expenditure, some libraries will move from collecting material in anticipation of its use to resource management that is more directly responsive to expressed, explicit user need.
- Libraries will incorporate sophisticated data analysis and cost-modeling techniques into their operations.

The Outlook in Thirty Seconds

Research libraries are well positioned to take a strong role in the development of new business and selection models. Publishers that emphasize data- and user-driven approaches will attract a growing proportion of collection dollars. Research libraries able to see their collection activities through this analytical lens have the brightest prospects to make the full range of collections available to users; to be effective partners with faculty and students in teaching, research, and learning; and to be the most successful long-term custodians of the scholarly record.

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ⁱ In fall 2010, ARL’s Steering Committee on Transforming Research Libraries charged a task force to articulate a plan on 21st-century research library collection roles in the digital age. In the process of articulating the new landscape of collections, it became clear that action plans would emanate locally, as campus communities take stock of their assets, activities, and priorities in light of the changing framework. This report was written by ARL staff liaisons with significant input from the task force.
Task Force Members: Deborah Jakubs (Duke University) and Tom Leonard (University of California, Berkeley), co-chairs; Sharon Farb (UCLA); Fred Heath (University of Texas at Austin); Thomas Hickerson (University of Calgary); Wendy Lougee (University of Minnesota); Rick Luce (Emory University); Greg Raschke (North Carolina State University); Jay Schafer (University of Massachusetts Amherst).
Staff Liaisons: Chris Avery (ARL Visiting Program Officer; Pennsylvania State University), Sue Baughman (ARL), Judy Ruttenberg (ARL).