

## Guest Editorial

# Shadow Duel between Stereotypes: Perspectives on the Core Mission of Academic Libraries



Perspectives concerning the makeup of the core mission of academic libraries and the relative balance between its two major components – physical and virtual resources, vary widely leading to false expectations and unnecessary apprehensiveness.

One false expectation is the assumption by some that books are headed rapidly to the junk heap of history. Anthony Grafton (*Daedalus*, Winter 2009) presents an entirely different picture, noting that Princeton University's Firestone Library processes a mile of printed material each year while Oxford's Bodleian handles 5.2 kilometers. Grafton clearly appreciates the essential value of electronic resources to his teaching and research but insists on paying due homage to the continuing importance of books in the humanities and the social sciences.

The appreciation of electronic resources is not unusual in the work of humanities and social sciences faculty, some of whom are anxious about what they perceive as a sort of creep away from support for the physical resources in their respective libraries by campus and library administrators. They may be wrong or worried needlessly but the perspective remains. The focus on "library as place" as a social, cultural, and learning center may seem to imply a revised mission in which the word "books" does not appear prominently.

University of Chicago sociologist Andrew Abbott has not been reticent about his advocacy for books and their essential qualities (see "The Future of Knowing," University of Chicago Alumni Association talk, June 6, 2009, as well as his article "The Traditional Future: A Computational Theory of Library Research in *College & Research Libraries*, November 2008).

Abbott chaired a campus task force charged with preparing options for the design of a future library. Five years later at a groundbreaking ceremony celebrating "Building the Library of the Future at the Heart of the Campus," he remarked that "this library stands for our belief that at least one crucial variety of knowing – the variety that dominates the humanities and social sciences – is something other than just storage and retrieval."

It may well be that our discussion about the future of academic libraries occasionally distorts the reality of what is in fact happening. Grafton refers to this as the "shadow duel between stereotypes." Thus, as we move forward, we should continue to include faculty and students in the conversation so that those with false expectations and those with unnecessary apprehensiveness are corrected when wrong and relieved when worried.

Late last year Syracuse University's dean of libraries Suzanne Thorin faced an angry faculty concerned about her plan to send part of the book collection to a facility 250 miles away in Patterson, N.J. The situation led to meetings, to discussion, and to collaboration. At the conclusion, Thorin stated, "It's good to hear people's voices." (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 12, 2009)

May we all remain mindful of the legitimate concerns of faculty and students as we seek the appropriate balance between our physical and virtual resources and as we strive to avoid undetected or overlooked creep away from our core mission.

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