

The knotty problem of priorities and relationships

A response to the top issues

by Shirley K. Baker

Ed. note: In the November 2002 issue, W. Lee Hisle put forth the "Top issues facing academic libraries," which resulted from the work of the Focus on the Future Task Force. The following is a response to the issues.

When the Focus on the Future Task Force discussed issue four—creation, control, and preservation of digital resources¹—we did not touch on what is a key issue surrounding digital resources on campus.

Cliff Lynch, at the recent ARL/SPARC/CNI Workshop on Institutional Repositories, called this our *dirty little secret*. The secret is that there are many digital creations on our campuses designed by faculty and managed with graduate students as amateur system administrators. These digital creations may not be scalable, secure, or appropriately accessible.

How do these creations come about? Often faculty have early discussions with librarians, hoping for assistance with digital projects. Too often, the faculty are put off by the complexity of what the librarians propose. We understand the standards that should be applied for long-term stability and accessibility. We know about useful software products for managing digital information. But, when the choice is working with the librarians on a complex product or having a grad student whip up a workable model in a short time, the second choice

often wins. There seem to be few cases where successful compromises have been reached and projects have gone forward with some of the speed desired by the faculty and some of the structure required by the librarians.

Sometimes librarians have a second chance when an important project won't scale up or when maintaining the digital material becomes too complex. Models being developed at institutions such as Cal Tech and MIT provide repositories for housing faculty digital projects and require minimal faculty effort. These repositories, of course, require significant upfront library effort to create the capacity and the policies to accept, preserve, and provide access to digital materials.

The answer to our needs may come from putting in that effort to create the repositories so that librarians can respond swiftly and yet according to standards when opportunities arise. And, the most effective efforts may be collaborations among institutions, working with partners or within consortia to maximize quality of result and minimize the effort put forth by any individual institution.

Note

1. See the November 2002 issue of *C&RL News* for the article "Top issues facing academic libraries" or visit <http://www.ala.org/acrl/hislenov02.html>. ■

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