

Miranda Bennett

The tide is rising—Don't miss the boat

Staying afloat during institutional change

For the past two years, since the arrival of its new president, Renu Khator, the University of Houston (UH) has focused on one overarching goal: achieving the status of a Tier One research university. Efforts toward this end have involved all aspects of campus life, from research agendas and funding to classroom teaching to engagement with lawmakers and community members, and librarians have played an important part in moving the university toward this goal. We have participated in strategic planning discussions, developed innovative projects to address the shifting needs of our faculty and students, and advocated for the centrality of library services and resources to the university's identity as an emerging research institution. Based on my experience as a librarian at UH, I believe an emerging research university is an exciting environment for librarians and offers them a wealth of opportunities, provided they remain open to change, stay informed, and think carefully and critically about their evolving role.

UH is not unique in its desire to reach Tier One research university status, although the definition of that status remains ambiguous. The term "emerging research university" comes from the Texas state legislature's plans for elevating state universities to this elite status, and this model makes special Tier One funding available on the basis of several criteria, including having an endowment of at least \$400 million, granting a minimum of 200 Ph.D. degrees annually, belonging to the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) or sponsoring a Phi Beta Kappa chapter, and meeting three additional standards related to freshman academic success, the quality of faculty, and the quality of graduate students. These cri-

teria, though in part ill-defined, capture the general sense that a Tier One or nationally competitive research university must pursue research on a major scale while ensuring high academic standards for all types of students. In Texas, seven state universities have been designated "emerging research universities," and while this particular approach is peculiar to Texas, I expect librarians from many parts of the country will recognize in their own institutions some of the characteristics of these universities.

Characteristics of an emerging research university

As it strives for Tier One status, UH exhibits several characteristics typical of institutions of higher education seeking to redefine themselves as nationally competitive research universities. These qualities present librarians with favorable circumstances for improving collaboration outside of the library, raising the library's profile on campus, and enhancing library support for the university's research and teaching missions.

First and foremost, as the term indicates, emerging research universities place increasing emphasis on research. Research in this case refers primarily, though not exclusively, to faculty research, especially projects that receive external funding from such sources as federal government agencies and private foundations. Because research expenditures are a key metric used to determine Tier One status, emerging research universities tend to

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encourage faculty in all disciplines to undertake ambitious research agendas and pursue significant grant funding.

Librarians are well positioned to support research on campus and presumably already do so at most universities. At an aspirational university, however, the need for librarians to understand and enable faculty research is increased, and both individually and collectively these librarians should strive to improve research services. This can take a number of forms. Subject librarians, for instance, can work with faculty to learn more about the research process—including the role of grant funding—in their disciplines. Collection development and acquisitions departments can analyze researchers' needs and assign budget allocations based on this information, and librarians interested in scholarly communication can collaborate with faculty to see that their research is disseminated appropriately.

Closely related to a stronger emphasis on research is a greater effort to support graduate education. Graduate students play a vital role in fulfilling a university's research mission, and, as described above, the number of doctoral degrees granted figures into some calculations of Tier One status. An emerging research university like UH may try to increase financial support for graduate students, encouraging recruitment and enabling them to finish their degrees quickly, and develop programs that provide graduate students with attractive teaching and research opportunities.

Graduate students tend to be among a university's most active library patrons, and new initiatives in graduate education present librarians with several opportunities. If they are not already offering library workshops for graduate students, librarians should consider designing such classes, which have met with good success at UH. A session on performing literature reviews or restarting stalled dissertation research, for example, can be a boon for graduate students. Addressing the library needs of graduate students who serve as teaching or research assistants, by providing information literacy instruction

for their students or extending them faculty-level borrowing privileges, is also important. Librarians could even become involved in the recruitment of graduate students by providing relevant marketing materials to departments or colleges.

Emerging research universities acknowledge that teaching and learning remain fundamental to their identity, even as they aggressively pursue greater research productivity, and UH has identified "student success" as another strategic goal. Efforts in this area, which focus on undergraduate education, include funding scholarships to improve the academic quality of incoming students, creating a first-year experience program, opening a center for teaching excellence, and removing barriers that prevent students from graduating on time.

Student success initiatives are a natural fit for the work of librarians, and in many cases we can capitalize on the emerging research university's interest in improvement in this area by continuing existing programs and services. Information literacy efforts, for instance, are an excellent means to promote student success, and a university's push to reach the next level adds urgency to this work and gives librarians another rhetorical angle from which to approach faculty. New projects, such as a first-year experience program or a center for teaching excellence, benefit from librarian involvement from their earliest stages. Many librarians have the educational and professional qualifications to confidently offer their insights and expertise to the faculty and administrators charged with undertaking these efforts.

While research and teaching are two components of university life with which most librarians are already familiar and comfortable, a university seeking nationally competitive status will also engage actively in two areas that some in higher education view with suspicion if not hostility: fundraising and external rankings. An aspirational university is unlikely to reach its goals without more money, so budget issues become more prominent (especially in a time of recession).

As it strives for Tier One status, UH is redoubling its efforts to raise money from alumni and other donors, as well as through grants, increased state appropriations, and tuition increases. Librarians have fewer opportunities in this realm than in the previous two discussed, but they can certainly use their research skills to help faculty and administrators identify potential funding sources, reach out to alumni to encourage their ongoing engagement with their alma mater, and support efforts to boost state funding (a caveat with regard to this last suggestion: librarians in state institutions are likely prohibited from advocating any political action on work time or using work resources).

Finally, and perhaps most obviously, a university determined to advance in rank will be very interested in rankings. Even when the formula behind a ranking invites skepticism, university administrators take into account the role of a ranking in public perception and often place seemingly inordinate importance on it. Because such rankings, from the well-known and much-maligned *U.S. News & World Report* annual list or the more sophisticated but relatively obscure Top American Research Universities Report, depend on quantitative metrics, emerging research universities tend to define success in terms of strictly measurable outcomes. At UH, research expenditures, six-year graduation rates, alumni giving rates, and the like have become convenient measuring sticks and, it is hoped, reasonable proxies for genuine progress.

Librarians may be uncomfortable with this type of assessment, and they will find many faculty who share this view, but they can also look for opportunities to contribute library-related statistics in support of an advance in a ranking.

Libraries can even strive to move up in rankings of their own; ARL rankings, for example, are based entirely on quantitative criteria, and UH Libraries' administration has presented a potential boost in its ARL ranking as a library contribution to the larger cause of attaining Tier One status.

Staying informed

Any librarian working in an emerging research university should make a conscious and concerted effort to stay up-to-date on university priorities and initiatives. A university striving to make a significant change in status can change rapidly, at least in its rhetoric, and librarians will find it advantageous to follow and participate in campus and broader conversations about the university's goals and objectives.

To find information about a university's plans, librarians can turn to a variety of sources. Campus publications, from strategic planning documents to the student newspaper, are obvious places to start and frequently encourage feedback, such as online comments or letters to the editor. Another important information source is local news outlets, which often give a very different perspective on a university's efforts than do its internal publications. Articles about UH's Tier One plans in the online *Houston Chronicle*, for example, inspire pages of reader comments, ranging from the unabashedly supportive to the bitterly disparaging.

Librarians should also look for in-person opportunities to learn about and discuss their university's plans. At the UH, Tier One-related items routinely appear on the agendas of public meetings of the Faculty Senate, whose members include three librarians, and the Board of Regents. These meetings give librarians a chance to hear the perspectives of important constituencies, as well as show their university colleagues that librarians have a stake in the proceedings. An emerging research university may also host various public forums to discuss specific issues, such as presentations of a developing strategic plan.

In addition to these information sources, which relate to the particular institution, librarians can apply their research expertise to learning more about broader issues affecting emerging research universities. For example, they can closely examine the external ranking systems their university is relying on, such as the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, or investigate the plans

of peer institutions with similar goals. Such information-gathering can provide valuable context for their university's projects and make librarians exceptionally well-informed participants in the community's conversations.

Seize the moment

An emerging research university is an institution in flux. It can be an environment both invigorating and unsettling. It offers librarians wonderful possibilities to collaborate in new ways with faculty colleagues, administrators, and students; a strong impetus to enhance programs and services supporting research, graduate education, and student success; a set of rhetorical tools to advocate for increased library resources; and a variety of opportunities to use their specialized information skills to contribute to major university initiatives. But the emerging research university can also present librarians with challenges as institutional priorities change and valued elements of university life are called into question.

Librarians can transform these challenges into additional opportunities, however, by offering a voice of reasoned dissent from proposed policies or projects. Such opposition, if thoughtfully presented, can win librarians powerful allies among members of the campus community who share their concerns.

Although this essay has addressed the category of emerging research universities and the specific case of UH, the principles and strategies described could be used or adapted by librarians in any type of institution of higher education that seeks to change its identity or status. A community college preparing to offer four-year degree programs, a liberal arts school expanding into graduate education, an elite private university adding a medical school—each of these aspirational institutions would offer librarians an exciting set of opportunities and reward their efforts to stay informed about and actively engaged in the changes taking place around them, thus ensuring that library goals are advanced as the larger institution moves forward. *rn*

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