National-Scale Solutions

It is a distinct honor to have been selected as the editor of the E-Content department for *EDUCAUSE Review* for the coming year. Over the past years, many provocative and engaging articles have appeared in this department. As a special forum, E-Content provides a venue for concise and cogent explorations of key issues and ideas, and this is a tradition I certainly hope to continue and extend.

Of particular interest to me—and a topic I believe to be salient to a variety of professions—is the growing need to respond to our challenges within higher education by formulating, and building, national-scale solutions. Projects such as the HathiTrust and the nascent Digital Public Library of America are the result of representatives from many institutions and backgrounds forming an alliance that has the potential to transform access to the content and resources that are integral to research and teaching, while compelling us to rethink the traditional concept of an academic library, the value of information technology, and even the idea of the university.

Although such examples and potential new alliances will not be the sole focus of the E-Content department, they deserve some pride of place, and in the columns to come in 2011, distinguished thinkers from different backgrounds will be asked to discuss what they see as our more transformative opportunities that lie ahead if we thoughtfully band together and pool our expertise. Several colleges and universities can contribute to a national, common good by collaboratively producing data sets of valuable knowledge, yet a more dynamic and sweeping approach is one in which hundreds of colleges and universities coordinate this activity to create a digital environment that is accessible to students, faculty, and citizens agnostically. Such broad collaboration could produce a new “place” for exploration, enlightenment, and self-discovery—a place that could influence education for generations to come.

Within this focus on building new coalitions and collaborative efforts, one aspect that will be concomitantly explored is the somewhat delicate topic of how our traditional methods of organization and promulgation of our cultural heritage get in our way—that is, how we might inhibit or confound our best efforts in the name of continuity. Over the centuries, institutions have built an enormously redundant and expensive archipelago while outsourcing, at staggering costs, many scholarly communication aspects that could be more effectively and efficiently managed through larger-scale, rational collaboration. The concept of an academic library as an independent, physical home of analog materials that are accessible mostly by the surrounding collegiate society has a long tradition and is profoundly reinforced by the presence and persistence of the higher education institution itself: colleges and universities, especially the more prominent ones, define themselves by exclusivity and singularity of purpose. They compete against each other; they measure themselves in comparison and contrast with one another; and they hold tightly to their idiosyncrasies as defining elements of their status. In this respect, the tension between these inherited conceptual notions of separate, particular, and solitary and a networked infrastructure of information that has no “place” is palpable.

This tension is often duly noted, but it needs to be taken more seriously: the characteristics by which libraries and higher education institutions are defined are fundamentally incompatible with broadly deployed digital tools, resources, features, and capacity. As presently conceived, neither libraries nor universities are structured, organized, or funded to achieve the kind of federated and collaborative enterprise that the digital environment can provide and, in a sense, insists upon. These are, at heart, knowledge-organizing methods that are very difficult to reconcile; this salient disjunction elucidates in part the slow, halting, ad hoc migration of libraries and universities into the electronic arena.

Another factor contributing to this standalone mindset is the general pattern of funding in the United States. Much of higher education has been built project by project. These activities are often demarcated as having a beginning, a middle, and most importantly, an end. Long-term sustainability and broad collaboration are not usually aspects of project funding, whether in the sciences or in the humanities; cross-disciplinary funding is rarer still. Funding models tend to reflect, and reinforce, the existing organization of knowledge, which is further reified in the physical design of a typical campus.

In addition, higher education, generally speaking, is subject to the principles and consequences of public economics rather than to the formulas associated with a business marketplace. Public economics more accurately describes the typical edu-
cational milieu: the “products” of education and, by extension, libraries are largely public goods; to sustain them, higher education needs to construct a collaborative environment that willingly contributes to their persistence. A new “market” for higher education will have to be built patiently over time.

E-Content columns in 2011 will in part explore the new kinds of thinking that can lead to very large-scale solutions. I imagine that all of the following will be common to these efforts: strong regional coalitions that bring together diverse institutions; goals of federating shared resources and interests, including collections, technology, and expertise; and a genuine, volitional dependency on other, participating institutions for the provision of what was once a locally owned and managed asset. These projects will likely also share an important tactical approach. They will mitigate the concern over loss of individuality—loss of “brand,” in the common parlance—by keeping intact the level of tradition, history, and idiosyncrasy of the institutions involved and by building their interdependent alliances and collaborations within and among the services and programs that underpin research and teaching.

This will be no easy task, but from a strategic vantage point, at least as I have come to understand it, there is no ambiguity: the future of academic libraries and higher education rests on the ability to reconceive scholarly communication holistically, with its various components (discovering, reconstituting, publishing, and sharing knowledge and keeping the manifestations of that knowledge securely preserved and accessible) understood as interrelated and interdependent. The inherited norms, customs, traditions, and institutions that have structured research and teaching now need to be constructively challenged, redefined, and subsequently reassembled. The next two decades could witness an extraordinary flourish of activity among colleges and universities focused on repositioning, consolidation, and convergence. And as with so many other aspects of the digital revolution, our future as a result of that activity will turn less on technological innovation than on informed and empathetic leadership.

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