



Library Futures Taskforce Report
March 2021

Library Futures Taskforce Report

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I. Introduction. In February 2020, Senior Vice President Dan Reed convened the Library Futures Taskforce and tasked it with exploring the challenges and opportunities for the University of Utah Libraries at a time of rapid change in the expectations of library functions and services, as well as financial pressures resulting from burgeoning costs of serials and books (Appendix A). He identified five primary focus areas for discussion:

- Book acquisitions and University Press futures
- Open access and digital publication support
- Federal research mandates for open access and data retention
- Serials explosion, with journal and database prices increasing at non-sustainable rates
- Social change and expectations for information access and library usage

While Library leadership and staff were critical resources for the work of the taskforce, and were consulted on a regular basis, they were not formally included as members except in an *ex officio* capacity, because the taskforce was intended to provide an external perspective that will build University consensus and help to inform decisions on strategic goals and priorities.

The first meeting of the Taskforce took place on February 21, 2020 (Attachment B). The initial discussion highlighted the five key issues identified by SVP Reed. In addition, each member of the Taskforce reflected on the critical importance of the Libraries, although the way individuals accessed information and services varied widely by discipline and career stage. Based on the initial discussion, five subcommittees were created to delve more deeply into the identified issues: *Serials and Open Access*, *Core Library Services*, *Library Units with Separate Funding Streams*, *Potential Alternate Funding Sources*, and *Budget*. These subcommittees form the organizational rubric for the “Findings” section of this report, with the last two categories combined into one. The Taskforce planned to tour the Marriott Library to gain an understanding of overall operations, the footprint of services, and flow within the library. Further information was gathered from academic and news articles on the current status of libraries and the serials crisis, the Libraries’ 2019 Measuring Information Service Outcomes (MISO) Survey, four Town Hall meetings ([summary here: https://attheu.utah.edu/facultystaff/library-town-halls-wrap-up-with-questions-about-a-post-journal-future/](https://attheu.utah.edu/facultystaff/library-town-halls-wrap-up-with-questions-about-a-post-journal-future/)), and a Taskforce survey of students, faculty, and staff (Appendix C).

II. Executive Summary

Over the decades, libraries have evolved from physical repositories to “discovery layers,” platforms for research, collaboration, and creativity. Collections once dictated how services and spaces were designed; now users do. General reference services have evolved into individual, specialized consultation. That personal relationship, and the increased function of libraries as an access point for a host of campus services, proved a constant theme in our conversations with members of the University community. Whether accessing those services in person or online, students, faculty, and staff all recognized how critical the Libraries are to carrying out their learning, teaching, and research. In particular they appreciated the availability of trained support staff to answer questions and introduce them to new tools; they also praised the Libraries’ response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which found creative ways to maintain access to essential resources. While a library cannot be all things to all people, this is more or less just what library patrons expect it to be – and on some level the very definition of what a library is.

Libraries form more than just the physical cores of our campus. Like grand central stations, they are also the hub through which most of its research activity passes. As such, they act as prisms for disciplinary particularity, experienced differently by each of their users. Those users are attached to their research methods, and to the resources those methods require; one will find indispensable what another considers expendable. It is the role of a library to accommodate them all – to embody the idea of the university as a home for all modes of knowledge. Libraries, in other words, are where a university *becomes* a university, where many disciplines meet to become “One U” – and where our university meets others in turn, interfacing with the wider world. Predicated on diversity, universities thrive when their libraries serve as many of those constituencies as possible, offer as many routes to that world as possible, and promote as much circulation between the two as possible. When knowledge circulates, more is produced; wherever it is cut off, that part of the university begins to atrophy. There is no future of the University without its libraries: the health of one is inextricable from the other.

Any plan for the future of the University of Utah Libraries must start from this identity, urging us to rethink the relation between the Libraries and the University itself. In that spirit, this report offers recommendations for the Libraries and the University in equal measure, to be undertaken separately as well as in concert. Libraries are not like Colleges, Departments, and other research units, each pursuing its own ends and answerable for its own bottom line. They work to benefit the entire University: their mission is to enable and enhance the missions of everyone else. Their support should come from, and grow with, the entire University in kind. And while safeguards are needed to ensure they use that support effectively, transparently, and responsibly, it is critical that libraries continue to have the resources they require to meet that mission. That may sound counterintuitive in an era of runaway journal and database costs. But we must think big, boldly, and long-term. As leading universities have begun to exemplify, libraries are where we should be preparing to spend— as crucial investments not just in our research infrastructure, but in the impact of that research itself. Academic publishing has already begun a transformation from the pay-to-read, subscription-based model to a fee-based, pay-to-publish, open access one. We are thus not only in a struggle to survive the spiraling cost of subscriptions, but in a race to open access – and both must be engaged at once. Universities that invest early on in subsidized publication fees will bring their research to market first, to the largest readership; at the same time, universities that abandon subscriptions too soon will see their research suffer. For the moment, the bridge between the two paradigms is the read-and-publish agreement, a combination of subscriptions and open access, which only our libraries can negotiate for us – if they have the clout to demand it. So it is not just that our libraries are the means by which others’ work comes in; in the near future, they will be the portals by which *our work goes out*, directly determining the University’s global reach and influence. How much control over that we have will be a function of whether we can discern the opportunity in crisis, and seize it. This report is a call to such action.

III. Recommendations

With that in mind, and drawing on the findings discussed below, the Library Futures Taskforce recommends the Libraries and the University together adopt a combination of short-, medium-, and long-term strategies that maintain journal and database access, while at the same time develop the partnerships and programs needed to facilitate the transition to open access publishing in its fullest, most equitable form. Specifically, the Library Futures Taskforce recommends:

1. Increased funding for the Libraries should be a priority.

a. The Libraries act as an engine of research and innovation at the University. Without a corresponding increase in library resources, it may be difficult to sustain recent remarkable increases in research funding and student success. We therefore recommend a change in the budgeting model for the Library from a fixed contribution from the Vice President for Research Budget to a percentage of F&A, the practice at most peer institutions. Based on data from peer institutions (see Findings for details), we recommend a percentage of 2.5-3%.

b. A number of affiliated units use library resources out of proportion to their contribution to Library budgets. We recommend the Libraries and University work with these units to develop mechanisms that increase direct support to a level more reflective of use.

2. The recommended funding increase should be tied to a clear plan for reducing the cost of serials and databases. That plan should comprise **short-term, medium-term, and long-term** phases.

a. While letting journal and database subscriptions lapse would be the simplest, most rapid cost reduction, the impact on faculty, staff, and student research and teaching would likely be severe, and require compensatory investments that would reduce or even nullify savings. Recommended **short-term strategy**:

i. Increase and broaden support to the libraries in order to maintain provisional access to serials, until medium-term and long-term strategies can take effect. This is part of the purpose of Recommendation 1.

ii. The Libraries should immediately study the new UC-Elsevier deal (discussed in detail in “Findings”), and assess whether the University could and should seek a similar agreement for cost stabilization and read-and-publish open access. Considerations include whether the University currently has the leverage to obtain a similar agreement and whether it would be a net financial and academic benefit to the University.

b. If immediate contract renegotiation along the lines of the UC contract proves unsuccessful, the **medium-term strategy** should be to advance toward it gradually, stabilizing and reducing subscription costs through increasingly favorable contracts that would eventually include read-and-publish open access agreements.

i. This strategy depends critically on building multilateral purchasing partnerships and consortia among libraries and library systems that can be leveraged into increasingly strong negotiating positions. The UC deal and similar precedents in Europe establish that publishers will make concessions to blocs of sufficient scale, sharply increasing the pressure for other universities to follow suit. The Libraries belong to several consortia that do not currently have sufficient leverage, but could be used to seed larger consortia. It is imperative for the Libraries to aggressively pursue such leverage, through growing or joining existing collectives or initiating the formation of new ones.

ii. Multiple routes to a consortium exist: regional consolidation built from Utah outward; a coordinated Pac-12 response to the UC deal; a top-down approach led by AAU, ARL, or some other national body. Because we cannot predict which will prove most expeditious, and because we cannot rely on others to take the lead, the Libraries should pursue all avenues at once.

3. Alleviating the acute phase of the serials and database crisis over the next few years would allow increased focus on these concurrent **medium- and long-term strategies**:

a. Academic publishing appears to be moving slowly but inexorably toward a universal open access platform. What remains to be seen is whether the pay-to-publish model (fully open access journals) overtakes the pay-to-read model (unsustainably priced subscription-based journals) faster than publishers are willing to transition to the hybrid read-and-publish model (wherein individual articles within subscription-based journals can be made open-access by the authors for a fee), and how long that process takes. This uncertainty commits us to maintaining subscriptions *while* developing open access infrastructure at the same time – a dual investment in continuity and change that will pay dividends for those research universities able to negotiate it. The University of Utah must take aggressive steps to position itself advantageously for the open access future, while not disrupting the very faculty, staff, and student research it aims to publish thereby.

b. The University should create a program broadly accessible to faculty, staff, and student authors to subsidize making their articles in subscription journals open access. The program should be extensively publicized and usage should be tracked to ensure community awareness, equity, and accountability.

c. The University should invest more fundamentally in the normalization of open access publishing within the culture of the university, not only by defraying faculty, student,

and staff publication costs but by valuing open access in faculty appointment, review, and advancement processes. This strategy will depend on a systematic assessment of RPT standards and publication practices at discipline-specific levels, as well as a more global reorientation of our professional culture toward open access and public data repositories, all of which should be development and investment priorities for the Libraries and the University.

While the financial viability of the Libraries was a prime focus of the Library Futures Taskforce, in the course of our comprehensive analysis we identified a number of other areas of library operation ripe for strategic review and investment.

4. Many participants in the Taskforce's survey and town halls were surprised to learn of the serials crisis, were unaware of many library resources and services, and remarked on the difficulty of locating them via library websites. They care about their libraries, appreciated the information, and explicitly asked that it be conveyed more regularly. The Libraries should evaluate their current communication strategies and consider more sustained, effective, and targeted approaches to communication. Publicizing a broad range of resources and services to a broad range of busy users will be a challenge, but it is necessary to ensure that those services deliver fully on their value.

a. User-centered maps, graphics, and flow charts of library services, of the kind Marriott Library has already been developing, along with videos that highlight specific services, would provide a more visual, and user-friendly template on which to base both a website redesign and targeted communication campaigns. The Libraries should continue developing those prototypes toward wide, versatile application.

5. The Libraries have excelled at anticipating and responding to user needs for resources, services, and space. The process, however, appears to users to be more *ad hoc* than strategic. For the benefit of students, faculty, administrators, and even internal staff, the Libraries should develop, articulate, and communicate a unified vision, implemented alongside a more transparent, coordinated set of procedures for approving new program proposals, for assessing the performance of existing programs, and for deciding when and how programs should be decommissioned. Metrics for these decisions should incorporate impact, return on investment, contribution to mission and strategic goals, and equity.

a. User-centered maps of the library would be a useful frame for developing metrics. For example, a map color-coded for usage and density would help identify areas that may be under-used or under-resourced. The importance of meeting the needs of small constituencies was a common theme in Town Halls and subcommittee discussions. A density map should not be the sole driver of decisions, but would add useful data. Other maps might highlight interconnected resources or specific that may be of exceptional benefit to certain demographic groups or those in particular academic disciplines.

6. The Libraries have been generous in sharing space in their buildings with independently-funded units, but that policy also appears to be more *ad hoc* than strategic. As an extension of their vision (see above), the Libraries should develop a plan for the use of new and existing shared spaces, together with a formal, transparent process for their review. This should include an approach to leasing or sharing space based on collaboration with campus units that provide (or should provide) similar services, as well as on principles of equity and access.

a. As noted in Findings, the Libraries' commitment to democratizing technology, coupled with their provision of guidance from expert staff, make them a natural, central access point for resources, resulting in some necessary duplication of services. But duplication does not always have to mean redundancy. When services overlap with those available through other units (e.g., 3D printers or laptop loan), the Libraries should work together with those units to determine how to provide services in an integrated manner that is cost-effective for the campus as a whole.

b. In turn, the demonstrable effectiveness of using Libraries as distribution points for campus resources (especially undergraduate-facing ones) should factor into future administrative planning. Redundancy happens when one hand doesn't know what the other is doing. Individual Departments and Colleges might be the logical home for a particular service, but not its best logistical one; likewise, Libraries need barometers for student need on campus other than students themselves, who are not always apprised of what departments and colleges offer. The University should actively foster greater communication, coordination, and collaboration between the Libraries and individual Colleges and Departments, to ensure that each is continuously aware of the mission, initiatives, and resources being developed at the others.

7. Donor funds support and create important programs and facilities in the Libraries, and the Libraries have been successful in developing them. While we recognize that these funds often come with constraints on their use, the Libraries should continue efforts to expand and diversify their donor funding base.

8. Research data management is a growing need nationally. Funding agencies increasingly require that research data be submitted to repositories and universities are adopting it as a best practice for all research. While development of such databases and repositories requires centralized organization, the Libraries play a crucial role in their development. The Libraries should prioritize and increase their own investment in data management access for researchers and continue to use their resources to accelerate campus-wide initiatives.

9. The University of Utah Press has core strengths in publishing anthropology, archaeology, linguistics, natural history, Utah and Western history, Mormon Studies, and American Indian studies – topics of obvious and enduring importance to the University and the surrounding community. Its ability to fulfill this valuable role, however, is being limited by inadequate infrastructure and somewhat *ad hoc* practices. The steps it has already taken to streamline operations should accelerate. The UUP should invest in a more modern, integrated approach to

its business model, including acquiring a database management system, incorporating data analytics, co-producing its own projects, capitalizing on existing Marriott Library resources, and expanding staff to include a grants officer, with the long-term goal of becoming less prone to market volatility and more financially self-sustaining.