Out of the Future and Into the Past

Changing Paradigms for Books, Libraries and Universities.

As we enter the 21st century, Universities face an interesting set of contradictions. The present nature of course materials lies in the post-WWII GI Bill and began with the best of intentions. Universities needed industrial-strength and industrial-age solutions to handle the democratization of information with unprecedented waves of new students. Publishers stepped to the fore with a commodified model: the textbook solution. They would work with a select group of tenure-earning faculty on the production end of the manuscript lifecycle, entice participation with free review copies and conference funding, add supplemental income and perks through university tenure ladders, and the students would incur reasonable freight and costs. Unfortunately, inflationary pressures, greed and calcification of these models have disturbed this very comfortable 20th century dominant pattern. Students are justifiably upset at hyper-inflationary costs at times rivaling course fees in terms of materials. Congress has now entered the picture with results yet unknown - hopefully, a better intervention than recent financial crises herald.

All the while for-profit online universities have more than taken note. They have been fine tuning asynchronous teaching modes and understated educational methods of stealth. These typically lack interactive lectures and lend a premium to course materials. My university is also a pioneer in underwriting the costs of undergraduate course materials. They're not pass-throughs, but part of a bottom line in addition to ensuring high quality education for a larger population where value and quality are bottom lines. The response can take us back in history

and entrepreneurship to redefining the Academic Library--the most traditional element of the university. The results are an integrated tripartite structure perhaps more suitable for 21st century education.

1. Electronic Textbooks: American Public University Systems launched its electronic textbook program in 2006 with the library absorbing the electronic portion of the bookstore operations. This share has grown larger as we enter the second decade of the new millennium. This thrust also vaults the library into the ever more paranoid world of textbook publishers, negotiation strategies and spiraling out of control profit margins. APUS research also more surprisingly revealed that publishers are losing 65 percent or more of their supposed profit to the used book market. That chip on the table combined with lowered warehousing and production costs allows us to suggest 35% off print list as appropriate for bargaining without publishers blinking an eye. This piece could spend a lot of time on those discussions, nuances of electronic textbooks, avoiding the rising textbook rental market, the rise of open access alternative methodologies, technical issues/DRM, and less than satisfactory applicability for online classrooms; yet, perhaps its best turn to the other two elements.

2. Redefining the University Press: American Public University System is joining the small, but growing ranks of universities that are re-engineering often financially challenged traditional presses for classroom support. The dirty secret in academia is that most of the traditional presses are money losers. Other large questions also loom large. Why, for example, should students pay external publishers for anthologies for public domain materials, which are freely available on the web? Why should a university or program be forced to buyback the writings of the university's

professors and intellectual riches? In American Public University Libraries case, the drive is to

selectively seek out these niche programs that every university has, especially where the faculty

is strongest and traditional in print course literature is weakest.   At American Public University

System Homeland Security, Intelligence, Transportation. Faculty are being recruited as authors

and editors with librarian subject specialists to compile textbooks for original material, preprints

and articles. An editor is hired for quality assurance, feedback is gleaned from colleague

reviewers and a text is printed quickly, efficiently and used immediately as low cost course

material but also repurposed to be sold through Amazon and the general web. Payments are

variable to faculty based both on projected enrollments. Sales and costs of production are low on

a print on demand model.

3. Reenvisioning the University's Online Library: Thirdly, American Public University

System is proactively foregrounding the Academic library as an essential element of course

curriculum with library resources geared to direct course-by-course support. A radical idea: the

university is already paying vast sums of money to capitalize information resources - why not

use these. One of the big differences between for profits and traditional large academic libraries

is a sharper need to justify e-resources. If the library is purchasing vast quantities of articles,

ebooks and online media resources, why not make use of those directly in the online classroom?

Why is there a wall between the library's information resources and textbooks and how did this

arise to so effectively bed with publishers models? Conversely, how can one even pretend to

teach advanced courses in any discipline without redress to the most recent scholarly journals,

articles, resources and databases that define disciplinary research? Such 19th-century

contradictions make little sense in the Web Age. The challenge becomes not so much access to

information but the organization of vast riches of resources. Moreover, why not use the librarians in an intimate relation to both current curricula but also ever changing electronic holdings structures? Modern librarians are uniquely equipped partners for the faculty and ongoing course development but also for opening wider possibilities of media acquisition than were previously thought possible. Who better to help keep currency, ensure quality, and uncover the treasures on the Open Web, as well as with the licensed scholarly literature within Deep Web holdings? The textbook, university press and modern university is changing: questions become will traditional institutions be able to move with the current or be swept into the past.

That, in a nutshell, is our approach--a blend of the old with the paradigm shifts of the new on the way to re-defining Higher Education in the 21st century.