

Editor's Column: Scattered Thoughts

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It sounds trite, but I feel like one can easily characterize the contemporary institution of higher learning with the word *disruption*. Necessarily, the contemporary academic library can therefore also be characterized by the word *disruption*. This year has definitely felt disrupted, in more ways than one. It would be inappropriate, I think, to compare it to 2020 – potentially rotten apples to potentially rotten oranges.

There are, admittedly, overlaps – economic and employment uncertainty, political unrest, and technological boom. Effective this week, my own institution has begun sending out separation notices to classified and unclassified staff. *Separation notice* is an interesting euphemism for *pink slip*. Very few departments on campus escaped losing someone. I am losing two people from my library ecosystem. While it is unfortunate, it is also inevitable. I can only anticipate more such cuts following November elections, which has many in Louisiana uneasy about the potential impact of a changing of the guard. Current governor John Bel Edwards has generally been a boon for higher education in Louisiana, especially after several years of less-than-stellar support from the Office of the Governor in terms of education. Our unease is understandable.

In terms of technology, this year has also seen the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) in an unprecedented way. While ChatGPT – the current poster child for AI – burst on to the scene in November 2022, the dawning possibilities and panicking did not really begin until earlier this year. I spent the summer as the AOER and digital literacy content expert for the University of

Louisiana System (ULS). However, owing to conversations with the other content experts and a group of faculty and professionals from ULS institutions simply referred to as the Innovators Council, I found myself marinating in AI topics and discussion. Subsequently, I became part of the group that did programming around AI topics. My bailiwick in the AI arena appears to be ethics and policy writing.

As I have said several times since I found myself embroiled in these topics, had someone told me LAST summer that I would find myself doing presentations and research around AI topics, I would have thought them very confused indeed. Instead, I find myself doing just that – becoming one of the go-to people on my campus for AI programming and policy writing. I am finding myself being engaged in panel discussions for conferences around AI topics. This is most certainly not something I imagined I would partake of when I started library school – or even five years ago. Yet here I am.

I am not particularly focused, to be honest. Between the aforementioned disruptions, two research projects (a book chapter on anticensorship activities co-authored with my writing partner Lindsey Reno of UNO and a literature review on the ethics of AI in higher education), I feel mentally and intellectually drained. My brother-in-law is 9-month faculty, usually only teaching one or two courses in the summer. My mother-in-law confuses his 9-month pace for my 12-month one, and often remarks that summers must be slower for me. This is not the case, as I have often explained to her. Between the content expert work and my slow assumption of the mantle of ‘person comfortable talking about AI’ (I resist the word ‘expert’ here) on my campus, my attention seems to be drifting away from libraries to the broader context of education.

I don’t think this is inherently problematic. The top-down view of higher education afforded to me by my role and these system- and institutional-level opportunities helps me better

understand how libraries may be positioned and affected by these phenomena – not just at my own institution but in general as well. I have not yet been able to scale my experiences to my own libraries just yet, but when the time comes, I feel confident I’ll be able to.

However, as you may imagine, my attention/focus and energies are often going in many directions at once. Like many higher education administrators, I find myself often engaged beyond my own unit and in the wider context of my institution. This has its pros and cons – people remember me as the library director and see how the library can help and contribute, but I’m hella burned out. I am called upon to help others understand concepts (e.g., copyright/fair use and AI) which I feel necessitates continued professional development in those areas – but there are only so many hours in the day. Being engaged in other entities on campus – Title IX, IRB, student programming committee, curriculum review – gets me out of the library and involved on campus. But that engagement takes me away from library concerns, consuming energy that could be allocated for library activities.

I am mostly venting here. I do not believe there is a solution for these tensions. I call them *tensions* because they represent places where I must balance my job duties with my sense of professional responsibility, my ethics with my energies. These obligations are inevitable, as understaffing worsens, but also in the expectations of tenure-track faculty to contribute and demonstrate one’s self as an invested and proficient professional. I embrace them without (much) complaining, grateful for how those opportunities further expose me to people and more opportunities. Grateful for the chance to learn, to expand my understanding and knowledge, and to make meaningful connections – not just for professional networking reasons but for building a professional support system in which all benefit. Do I sometimes “feel thin, sort of stretched, like butter scraped over too much bread,” as Bilbo so eloquently stated? Yes.

However, as long as institutions of higher learning must evolve and adapt to survive, so must academic libraries, and so must academic librarians, support staff, and administrators. Sure, we may feel like we're being expected to become experts in areas which seem beyond the library. However, topics like AI, DEIB, digital literacy, professional development, policy-writing, ethics, and many others mentioned (and hinted at) in this column have immediate and direct relevance to the contemporary academic library. Therefore, I can only see such expansions beyond the library as opportunities to become more conversant in those topics and their possible impacts on the library and to contribute to those conversations in ways which positively position the library. Yes, I *am* tired, but there is no rest for the wicked!