Reimagining the Academic Library

Lewis, David W.
Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2016

Book Review

Tags: digital libraries | librarianship | theological education

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Technology and the digital age are rapidly changing the landscape of education. Theological institutions are not immune. Even though these changes can be difficult and painful, the fulfillment of our mission is enhanced and expanded when we embrace and lean into them.

One big current issue is the future of our libraries – what the digital academic library looks like and what it will take to get there. Even though significant change is necessary, a discernable path forward does exist (viii). This includes a substantial change in the role of library staff and the roles libraries play in their institution. As digital technologies replace print as the primary means of access to nearly everything, libraries will "move from using technology to do old things in new ways to using technology to do new things" (vii, viii). This will require new technologies, strategies, values, and even a new culture (xv). It is encouraging that Lewis writes this as an academic librarian with forty plus years of experience. He is a digital immigrant who has learned to accept and navigate the changes. Instead of holding onto the comfortable past, he is excited about the future!

This book reminds me of a well-written backcountry trail guide. It is divided into two sections. The first, "The Forces We Face," describes the landscape, including the history and background; the second, "Steps Down the Road," is the practical description of the trail ahead, including landmarks along the way. Whereas my backcountry guides discuss the flora, fauna, geology, people, and events significant to say Olympic National Park, Lewis takes us on a historical journey of academic libraries. The central theme is that libraries have always done three things: (a) kept documents for the long haul, (b) provided the knowledge and information that the communities and institutions that fund them need, and (c) assisted individuals in finding and using information (xi, 153). Libraries of the future will continue to do these same

things, but how they do them will look different. The focus has been and will continue to be their role in research and preservation and distribution of scholarship.

As with any trail guide, section two is the most important: the trail descriptions are found here. My backcountry guides list waypoints, elevation, mileage, landmarks, campsites, and other important information needed to successfully navigate the trail and arrive at the destination. Lewis in like manner describes important steps that need to be taken to arrive at his destination: an academic library, relevant and effective in the digital age. The trailhead is the library of the past, a place that builds local collections and staffs them with people who organize and know how to find the documents and facts in them (153). The destination at the end of the trail looks much different. Collections will be streamlined and library space will be utilized differently. Staff requirements and roles will not be the same. You will be uncomfortable with some of Lewis' ideas, but you will be stretched and prompted to thought and healthy conversation. We are using the book for this purpose at Denver Seminary.

I heartily recommend this book. The price may be high for a paperback, but this is a unique book that should be read by key members of every institution that wants to be proactive in moving ahead into the digital age. If nothing else, get ahold of a copy and read the Conclusion. This provides a quick summary of the major premises and practical steps.

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