Art Libraries Society of North America, 33rd Annual Conference, Hilton Americas, Houston, Texas, April 1-6, 2005

Opening Plenary Session
Saturday, April 2, 2005, 7:30 – 9:00 PM

Speaker:
Dr. Fred Heath, Vice Provost and Director of University of Texas Libraries
“Transforming Research Libraries: Teaching and Learning in the Digital Age”

Recorder: Kimberly Pendell, School of Information, University of Texas at Austin.

Dr. Fred Heath addressed the challenges and opportunities of teaching and learning in the digital age, as seen from his perspective as the director at one of the larger research universities in the country, the University of Texas at Austin. Collaboration is a key theme in today’s research university; faculty and students, scientists and humanities scholars are all involved in collaborative projects. Dr. Heath believes collaboration is necessary for the continued advancement of the higher education system in the United States. The expansion of the higher education system, particularly after World War II, led to great economic growth in the United States and a significant increase in college educated citizens. However, the health of the publicly funded university has recently weakened, and tuition costs are steadily rising to keep pace with budget cuts. To succeed, public universities need to re-engineer themselves to be affordable and to focus more upon the needs of learners.

Dr. Heath described the impact of technology on higher education, saying that technology has fundamentally altered the relationship between people and knowledge. With the promises of technology, the future of higher education lies “in collaboration among universities, among scholars, and among students.” Dr. Heath cited the report of National Science Foundation (NSF) Blue Ribbon Advisory Panel on Cyberinfrastructure, Revolutionizing Science and Engineering Through Cyberinfrastructure, as a key publication on communication technologies and information systems as means of creating and disseminating knowledge within higher education. Unfortunately, projects connecting technologies with the humanities are more limited than those in fields like science and engineering.

Dr. Heath then discussed the state of research libraries in America, particularly in terms of sustainability. It is becoming more and more difficult for libraries to financially sustain the increasing cost of library collections under the commercial model. In contrast to library collection development practices that encourage libraries to look “distressingly the same,” Dr. Heath presented the example of the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas—a center that has actively developed a distinctive collection.

The impact of technology in libraries is great, especially in terms of cost, access restrictions, scalability, and user behaviors. The increasing cost of print-oriented libraries, combined with lower levels of support, demands for accountability, and the erosion of the social compact result in a situation bordering on crisis. Scholarly conversation is limited by access restrictions, and assaults on fair use; as an example, Adobe’s license restrictions for their e-version of Alice in Wonderland included the stipulation that the user would not read the book aloud. Scalability becomes an important issue in the resource allocation between print collections and digital information. Lastly, user behavior demonstrates increasing reliance on the
Internet for information access: printed book circulation in all ARL libraries has declined, and results from the LibQUAL+ study reveal that users do not highly value individual attention at public service desks.

For libraries to remain vital to teaching, learning, and research, Dr. Heath offers these steps: let go of old paradigms; develop skills sets for the digital arena; establish new paradigms as partners in the digital learning environment; take advantage of technology, “move upstream” to where research is happening, and assert the uniqueness of one’s university; and seek grants and funding to develop resources and skill sets for the digital arena.

Practices more suited to the digital environment must be explored. In application, these practices include the development of open access publishing, “public domain” licensing, discovery models that allow intermediate access to research prior to journal publishing, and institutional repositories. Secondly, new skill sets need to be developed for the digital environment; an example is the recent IMLS initiative to train librarians and information specialists in the creation, management, and preservation of digital collections. New paradigms of research involve interdisciplinary work in the humanities and the sciences; many innovative projects, such as the 3-D scanning of Michelangelo’s sculptures, are also shaping teaching and learning in the digital environment. Research libraries can “move upstream” by asserting their distinctiveness, rather than their sameness. Instead of supplying only the end product of research, librarians can partner with content creators and assist them in providing a means of expression for their work and a means of access to their work for the community. Finally, funding sources need to be cultivated, but with the knowledge that re-engineering for the digital age also needs to take place from within the library.

Dr. Heath concluded his talk by saying: “re-engineering requires innovation, inspiration, and the will to work in collaborative interdisciplinary and cross-organizational initiatives.” The costs of developing new models for libraries can come, in part, from the resources expended on old models. While the status quo is often preferred, change is an inevitable necessity for the continued vitality of libraries in the digital environment.