I found four major themes amongst the responses of the 73 people who identified themselves as academic librarians. Each theme comes with its own challenges and opportunities. First, I will briefly summarize my survey responses. First, using several methods we tried to figure what the typical academic librarian does.
These are the major tasks. I didn’t have room to include everything that academic librarians listed.

You can see that we still focus primarily on core duties, such as collection development and reference. We also spend a lot of time on managing and facilitating workgroups. We also asked for the “emerging tasks.” In other words, what do you spend an increasing amount of your time doing.
The task that has really mushroomed in the past five years, according to our respondents, is communication. Social networking, in particular, consumes a lot of our time. We are also very involved in our libraries’ virtual presence and online reference services. Instruction, including online instruction, is the next biggest trend. Software applications and computer troubleshooting next. There’s an increased focus on marketing and leaving the library to conduct services. At the back of the list, but of possible worry, are the number of librarians who complain about taking on clerical and shelving tasks because of widespread staff reductions.

So, not surprisingly, our new tasks center around online communication and services. Most academic librarians, however, feel they have insufficient technical training and usually have to teach themselves to use software and social sites. Many also find that social networking hasn’t effectively marketed their libraries and patrons respond best to a personal approach.

More than 60% of our respondents work in a small or branch library. When we isolate that cohort, we find that the librarians’ role is not unlike that of a small business owner. They are more likely to mention public relations and marketing, as well as management and reporting tasks. Having to take on an increasing number of new tasks, on top of existing duties, seems to weigh heavily on some. Their responses to our questions about time and task management elicited such responses as “I work 55+ hours a week.”
You can see here the benefits and challenges to adopting these new roles. Many imply, however, that weighing benefits is irrelevant. Librarians have no choice but to adapt to new roles and take on new tasks, or they will cease to exist. “Adapt or die” was literally a repeated response.

Others mention that librarians are not being recompensed for learning new skills and implementing new programs. Input from librarians also helps information vendors improve their product but libraries are not compensated for acting as consultants. A few interesting points about the customer experience also came up:

Customers often don’t expect these services
They aren’t necessarily part of our mission
There’s little assessment to determine whether customers want or need these services
What do they want?

What patrons expect from us and what we actually do are very different. They expect the four major core services (reference, instruction, collections, computer troubleshooting). Other tasks areas that take up much of our time aren’t on their radar. Once they discover the emerging tasks, our respondents say these are the ones that prove most popular. A couple are predictable, but they also want the kind of community services one expects from a public library: discussion groups, events, exhibits. Two years ago we hosted faculty focus groups at the University of Houston to determine how to improve the subject liaising. We found that the faculty most wanted the library to host faculty happy hours or even a faculty club, to facilitate inter-department socializing. Many of us were appalled that they would suggest that was part of our campus role, but I think we’re missing an incredible opportunity by not doing this.

So, the four big challenges I spoke about…
First: subject expertise in traditional academic libraries is becoming irrelevant. This is not irrevocable, but it is certainly a trend. Subject-specific collection development and research-assistance duties have been taken from a number of our respondents. Several worried that we are losing our specialized identity as art librarians as our institutions provide cookie-cutter programming and instruction across departments. 48% reported that they were not asked to perform extra tasks based on their subject expertise and several expressed frustration with this.

When asked where they'd be in 5 and 15 years, an alarming number expressed the opinion that libraries won't exist in 15 years. 41% are anticipating leaving the profession within that time and almost a quarter plan to leave within 5 years. Most will retire, but some are preparing to join other professions. The most experienced among us are also the most certain of the profession's demise.
We are in the midst of a training crisis. Librarians continue to receive training for core skills, copyright, and scholarly communications from a variety of sources, chiefly from their graduate education. When it comes to technical and software training, however, librarians must typically teach themselves. There’s also a dearth of training in library marketing and public relations. Everyone anticipates librarians will greatly need both promotional and Web 2.0 skills. Considering universities and employers aren’t providing it, organizations like ARLIS might consider building more of those training components in their conferences, workshops, and meetings. In addition to presentations like these, there might be more hands-on workshops.

The one training area where our employers have stepped up is in the area of people skills. Facilitation and leadership training is regularly provided by our employers.
More and more of us are adopting new methods to communicate, promote services, and record institutional information. More than half of the respondents use a variety of Web 2.0 applications to communicate with colleagues and patrons. 66% said they don’t have sufficient Web 2.0 training, however, and most of us are self-taught. Most respondents, however, are very excited by this technology and feel the benefits of being cutting-edge outweigh the challenge of keep up with the new technology.

Many of us become very attached to particular tools and online communities. Not all of these tools interact. If librarians are uncomfortable adapting to new ones, we might become entrenched in communication silos. I’ve already seen bloggers and facebook friends argue the relative merits of each practice with the fervor of a zealot. While sifting through the responses, I wondered how these respondents will agree to communicate and collaborate in a few years. As the traditional networking methods like listservs become disused, I wonder how we will be introduced to one another in the first place.
Art collections now include posters, artifacts, sculpture, 2d and 3d art, streaming video and audio, graphic novels, building materials, and prints of working drawings. When asked what non-traditional materials librarians collect, many expressed confusion as to what constitutes a non-traditional item. Some listed material others consider traditional, like dvd’s and websites. This fluidity and confusion shows how undefined art collections are now. There’s no longer a clear division between which materials are traditional and which aren’t. That, however, may prove to be a great strength.

More than half of respondents reported that they contribute to or manage an institutional digital collection. These also report copyright law presents huge challenges to them in terms of understanding and implementation. I anticipate that any librarians who conduct a similar survey of librarians in five years will find that almost all academic art librarians are involved in an online institutional repository. I also anticipate that the professional will be both more knowledgeable and more flexible when it comes to the legal issues.
Thanks very much to all of you who completed the survey and gave us this snapshot of your worklife. We gathered much more information than I can possibly present here, but we will be reporting on the survey results in-depth in Paul Glassman and Amanda Gluibizzi’s upcoming Handbook of Art and Design Librarianship for Higher Education.

Thank you!