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Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Academic Libraries

A Leadership Perspective

In recent years, discussions surrounding artificial intelligence (AI) have surged in conferences and journals of academic libraries. It is obvious that AI has become one of the most frequently mentioned topics in professional circles and our organizations at the present. The potential impact and implications of AI on academic libraries and higher education have sparked interesting debates, drawing mixed reactions from our community. Some view AI as an opportunity for libraries, while others approach it with caution. This dichotomy of opinions and the growing fascination with AI tools like ChatGPT reminds me of the advent of Google and other search engines more than two decades ago.

When Google first emerged, it was widely perceived as a direct threat to the very existence of libraries. I remember various private discussions and blog postings at that time painted a bleak future for libraries, voicing concerns over the impact of search engines on libraries' relevance.¹ The popularity of Google seemed to bring out the shortcomings of library online catalog systems. An OCLC study² discussed the substantial expectation gaps between library users and librarians regarding online catalogs, signifying a shift in information-seeking behaviors due to search engines. At that time, more folks in our profession saw Google as an existential threat rather than a potential collaborator or a useful research tool. However, this sentiment has evolved over the years, with Google now serving as a useful reference and research aid.³

As AI technologies become increasingly prevalent, similar questions arise about the potential replacement of library roles with AI systems. While it is premature to make definitive predictions, it is undeniable that AI will bring changes to academic libraries, much like Google's emergence led to transformations in reference services, information literacy, library online catalogs, digitization, and library systems. We should anticipate that AI will introduce innovations and shifts in academic libraries, drawing from our experiences with past technological advancements.

I believe that in today's rapidly evolving landscape, academic libraries require transformational leadership that fosters innovative thinking and creates a culture of experimentation, where trials and errors are not just accepted but encouraged.⁴ Such leadership should inspire collaboration, team building, and mutual learning among library staff and faculty. Library leaders must develop proactive strategies and take practical actions to prepare for the impact of AI.

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In response to the growing interest in AI tools, our library established the AI Exploratory Working Group last fall. This group is dedicated to understanding the current and emerging AI landscape and facilitating discussions about how AI can support research and enhance information literacy within academic libraries. This spring, we introduced the AI Experimentation Working Group to provide our staff and faculty with practical opportunities to explore and experiment with AI tools firsthand. The intent behind these initiatives is multifaceted:

1. **Increase AI literacy:** Reflecting on our adaptation to past technologies, it is crucial to embrace rather than resist technological advances. These working groups are designed to foster an environment where staff and faculty can experiment with AI tools, promoting curiosity and a deeper understanding of how these technologies can enhance our operations and academic endeavors.

2. **Decrease AI fear:** By demystifying how AI tools function, including their strengths, limitations, and potential applications in our work environment, we aim to alleviate common apprehensions about new AI technologies. Understanding AI in depth will allow our team to integrate these tools more confidently and creatively.

3. **Enhance organizational efficiency:** Distinguishing between tasks that AI can optimize and those that require a human touch will significantly enhance our organizational efficiency. By automating routine and data-intensive tasks, AI can free up our staff to focus on areas requiring human expertise, such as customer service and user engagement, thus amplifying the value of our human capital.

The launches of the two working groups, their charges, and desirable outcomes were widely communicated with all library personnel, generating significant interest and excitement among our staff and faculty. The AI Exploratory Working Group delivered insightful presentations on their work progress in fall 2023 and spring 2024. In August 2024, we published the final report of the working group⁵ on our library website to share it with the broader community.

Meanwhile, the AI Experimentation Working Group is actively identifying and testing AI applications in various areas, including:

- archives and metadata
- business tools
- data analysis and cleanup
- ticketing and customer support

Their work is helping to pinpoint where AI can streamline processes and increase organizational efficiency. This working group's ongoing efforts are expected to provide valuable insights into practical AI implementations within our library system.

The analogy between Google's rise and the burgeoning impact of AI may not be perfect, given AI's broader implications and exceptionally rapid development. However, reflecting on our past technology integrations provides crucial insights into how we can approach AI. It's clear that AI's influence on academic libraries and higher education will likely surpass that of earlier innovations, making the proactive role of library leadership not just advisable but essential.

As we look toward the future, it is imperative that we learn from the past technological integrations while staying ahead of emerging technologies. By leading thoughtfully and

collaboratively, we have the opportunity to transform potential disruptions into avenues for growth and enhanced service delivery. This proactive approach will ensure that academic libraries continue to serve as vital centers of learning and innovation in the age of AI. ❧

Notes

1. Rick Anderson, “The (Uncertain) Future of Libraries in a Google World,” *Internet Reference Services Quarterly* 10, no. 3–4 (2005): 29–36, https://doi.org/10.1300/J136v10n03_04.
2. Karen Calhoun, Joanne Cantrell, Peggy Gallagher, and Janet Hawk, “Online Catalogs: What Users and Librarians Want,” OCLC, 2009, <https://www.oclc.org/content/dam/oclc/reports/onlinecatalogs/fullreport.pdf>.
3. Bhupender Singh, “Google an Opportunity or Threat for Libraries,” *International Journal of Information Library and Society* 10, no. 1 (2021): 26–29.
4. Tarek Shal, Norma Ghamrawi, and Hiba Naccache, “Leadership Styles and AI Acceptance in Academic Librarians in Higher Education,” *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 50, no. 2 (2024): 102849, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2024.102849>.
5. AI Exploratory Working Group, “Artificial Intelligence and Libraries,” American University Library, July 15, 2024, <https://subjectguides.library.american.edu/c.php?g=1410777&p=10447758>.