Economics of Research Libraries

Panelists:
Susan Ardis
University of Texas
Austin, Texas

Fred Heath
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College Station, Texas

Julia Blixrud
SPARC
Washington, DC

Reporter:
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Baltimore, Maryland

Susan Ardis laid the ground rules of how materials are selected for her library. Every decision is keyed to current and future users in recognition that users are concerned only about their own needs. In her institution graduate students are considered the workhorses of science, and their needs are given high priority.

Ardis listed criteria for selecting electronic products. Top ranking goes to a product that benefits more than one department, such as biochemistry. Second ranking is earned by a product that benefits two programs. Products targeted to the undergraduate level get third ranking. Highly specialized products get fourth ranking. "One-trick ponies", unique products, get fifth ranking. Products that are out of scope and not in English come in last.

She addressed a few simple truths. Money is money. Use is use. Reality can be formulated as (Education + Communication)/Politics. If no one uses a product and no one wants it, the librarian doesn't buy it. If no one uses a product but the dean of the school wants it, the librarian buys it. In fact, librarians don't buy content, they buy use. As the "traffic cops of sharing", she reminded us, libraries are about sharing.

Fred Heath shared his concerns about the unsustainability of the current scholarly communication model. The budgetary strain of new print and electronic products was highlighted. Furthermore, there is uncertainty about publishers' willingness to archive electronic products and concern about young researchers' careers when they publish in e-journals only. Use drives selection. So how do librarians cope? They reduce the number of subscriptions, collaborate on cooperative collection development, improve interlibrary loan (ILL) techniques, and engage in consortial licensing.

Heath said that the electronic revolution is destabilizing libraries. It is no longer necessary to have a comprehensive collection. ILL has become an effective technique to handle queries. Electronic delivery of information is more common. He pointed out that faculty members can now have successful research careers in universities that do not have extensive library collections.

He closed by discussing the idea that "Shift happens, new paradigms arise." As movable type shifted communication, technology will shift scholarly communication.

Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC) is an international alliance of libraries that facilitates competition in scholarly communication. SPARC is an initiative of the US Association of Research Libraries. Julia Blixrud explained that it was created to provide librarians an alternative to high-priced journals. SPARC creates partnerships with publishers that are developing high-quality, economical publications.

By partnering with publishers, SPARC aims to create a more competitive scholarly communication marketplace in which the cost of journal acquisition and use is reduced and publishers who are responsive to customer needs are rewarded. The objectives of this strategy are to ensure fair use of electronic resources while strengthening the proprietary rights and privileges of authorship, and to apply technology to improve the process of scholarly communication and reduce the costs of production and distribution.

Blixrud pointed out the strategies that SPARC is using to develop these partnerships. SPARC will reduce the financial risk associated with the publications through the purchase commitment of the libraries participating in the program, will work with prestigious societies and editorial boards, will raise awareness of issues, will draw authors and editors away from high-priced products, and will encourage innovative uses of technology.

SPARC has three types of partnerships. "SPARC Alternatives" support lower-cost, directly competitive alternatives to high-priced scientific, technical, or medical (STM) journals. "SPARC Leading Edge" supports ventures that obtain competitive advantage through technology use or innovative business models or that address information needs of emerging or fast-growing STM fields. "SPARC Communities" support development of nonprofit portals that serve the needs of a discrete scientific community by aggregating peer-reviewed research and other content.