# CEO Newsletter

## Real Relevance

**Atlanta University Center**
**Robert W. Woodruff Library**
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I find myself thinking a lot lately about relevance. Like most academic library directors, my visceral response to the suggestion that our hallowed institutions might not be as necessary to teaching and learning in the 21st century as they were in the pre-digital age is a resounding, "But, of course, we are!"

Still, in my more reflective moments, I do admit (at least to myself) that the issue of whether or not college and university libraries can and do make a difference in today's academic environment is a really, really good question. And as I consider the answer for my library, I take at least some comfort in the fact that other directors are seeking answers for their libraries, too.

Indeed, the 2011 *Standards for Libraries in Higher Education* proposed by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) underscore the fact that this question is top of mind for our entire field. In a change from the standards adopted in 2004, the new draft standards say that "libraries must demonstrate their value and document their contributions to overall institutional effectiveness and be prepared to address changes in higher education."

My translation: Explicitly, this mandate is about validating reasons for academic libraries to exist. Implicitly, it is about ensuring that those reasons remain relevant through the test of time.

Susan Sontag, an American writer, activist and critic, said that "existence is no more than the precarious attainment of relevance in an intensely mobile flux of past, present, and future." How apropos her insight for libraries as we seek to negotiate our existence and prove our ongoing relevance in the midst of developments such as advances in technology (perhaps the most intense of mobile fluxes). These developments have already changed everything about the past and present, and likely will change everything in the future regarding how we serve our users.

So, are academic libraries still relevant in the 21st century? Well, as with most things, it all depends. Sontag suggests that there is no natural, causal link between existence and relevance, that relevance is a hard-fought position to attain and to hold. I quite agree. So, the answer to the question of the relevance of libraries ultimately depends on how we handle all the flux and change, whether or not we are being what ACRL calls "aggressively innovative." Take, for example, how libraries might deal with photography.

Photographs are an important record of the human experience and, as time passes, a tangible way to link current generations of learners with the past. At the AUC Woodruff Library, where about 10 percent of our holdings are comprised of photographs, we have been engaged in preserving, conserving and digitizing hundreds of early photos of the Atlanta University Center. By applying innovations in the evolving art and craft of photograph preservation and environmental monitoring and control, we are ensuring that these important artifacts live on. And, in the process, we are helping to ensure our relevance as a source of invaluable tools for teaching and learning.

But to remain relevant, our innovation in this area cannot just address photos of the past. We must also consider how best to collect, manage and preserve photos made in the present – a time when every image is

"born digital" and must be maintained digitally. While there still is uncertainty about how best to do this, what does seem certain is that libraries will need to make big investments in new technology and expertise to prevent these photos from eventually deteriorating, and to ensure they remain accessible to users in the latest media formats. Here, again, innovation (and the ability to pay for it) will drive relevance.

But fortunately for libraries, relevance – what I call *real relevance* – is not just about having the latest devices, bells and whistles, as essential as these are to 21st century service delivery. In my view, real relevance has as much, if not more, to do with the character and quality of the relationships we forge with the institutions we serve.

That's why at the AUC Woodruff Library, we think of ourselves as intellectual partners whose job is to support and inspire growth among our students and faculty. In this context, innovation looks like thinking together, questioning, and at times challenging our users. Relevance looks like helping them understand that even the most carefully preserved photograph, which we might assume is "real" because it is purported to have captured an actual event, is only one person's framing of reality (with or without the benefit of Photoshop) and, by definition, not the whole truth.

Real relevance is the critical role academic libraries have and continue to play in helping learners transform information into knowledge – the whole goal of education.

Are we still relevant in that regard? But, of course, we are!

Until next time….

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